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Cover photo: Abstract painter William T. Williams in his studio in the "NoHo," or North Houston, district of Manhattan. Photograph by Hugh Bell.
William T. Williams in his studio in Manhattan.
Behind Closed Doors

William T. Williams Struggles to Create Paintings that Have a Life of Their Own

by Valerie J. Mercer

In the privacy of his studio, New York-based abstract painter William T. Williams has been diligently at work for the past 20 years, integrating through his art the content of his life with his knowledge of modernist painting. The compositions he has created during this period reveal his consistent success in pursuing his artistic vision.

After completing an M.F.A. degree program in painting at Yale University in 1968, Williams
"Indian Summer," 1974 acrylic on canvas, 84" × 60".

"Savannah," 1979 acrylic on canvas, 84" × 60".

"A Note to Marcel Proust," 1984 acrylic on canvas, 84" × 54 1/2".

quickly gained attention from the mainstream art world. The Museum of Modern Art acquired his composition “Elbert Jackson L.A.M.F., Part II” in 1969, and by 1970 his work was being exhibited at the Foundation Maeght in the south of France, in a room with paintings by some of the superstars of abstract expressionism: Willem De Kooning, Mark Rothko, Clyfford Still and Philip Guston. His first one-man show at New York’s Reese Palley Gallery in 1971 resulted in the sale of every painting. That same year, the Whitney Museum of American Art exhibited his work twice; collectors such as AT&T and General Mills purchased his art; and his work was featured in both Life and Time magazines.

But as far as the young artist was concerned, everything was happening much too fast. He yearned for time to think about what he was doing before he was swallowed up by the huge commercial machine that was starting to churn.

He soon concluded that it was important for him to withdraw from the celebrity and influence of the New York art scene and concentrate on realizing his own ambitions for his art. “I decided that if I had anything to say, it was time that I back away from all that and do what I wanted to do,” he explains.

Williams, who has been teaching painting and drawing at Brooklyn College since 1971, drew inspiration during his retreat from the commercialism of the art world through memories of places in his past. “I started going back to Spring Lake, N.C., a great deal—where I was born in 1942,” he says. “I started taking pictures of the places I had grown up in ... including a public housing project in the Far Rockaway section of Queens, N.Y., where I moved with my parents in 1952. A lot of the references at that point had to do with those places, and what began to hit me was that that sense of place was very impor-
tant in terms of iconography and in terms of what I was about as an artist."

Williams speaks fondly of his early years spent in an insulated Southern community where neighbors and teachers were members of his extended family. His parents instilled respect for education, discipline and competition in their two sons.

The family's move to the North eventually had a positive effect on Williams' future when his art talent was recognized by the head of a local community center who gave him a room there to use as a studio. He attended the High School of Industrial Arts in Manhattan (now the High School of Art and Design), which held many of its classes at the Museum of Modern Art and the Metropolitan Museum.

In 1962 Williams entered Pratt Institute to study painting. During his junior year there, he won a summer scholarship to the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Maine, where he met and talked with professional artists. Before his brief stay was over, he had decided that he would become an artist.

He returned to Pratt for his senior year, and renowned figurative painters Alex Katz and Phillip Pearlstein, who taught at the school, encouraged him to apply to Yale University for graduate school. His mentor there was Al Held, a New York painter who, at the time, specialized in large paintings of geometric abstraction.

Williams, a slim, soft-spoken and straightforward man, went on to create paintings related to his interest in the prevailing minimal formalist aesthetic, with its mechanistic sensibility and insistence that painting avoid reference to an object or event beyond the painting itself. This artistic tendency emerged during the 1960s in reaction to the improvisational and autobiographical abstract expressionism that had dominated American modernist painting of the 1950s. Commonly referred to as minimalism, its proponents insisted that a work of art should be created as an object independent of personal or symbolic reference that could be interpreted as a subject. Such a view implied that the only worthwhile subject for a painting was the actual art process involved in making the painting.

Most of the painters who attempted to realize this new concept in their work produced paintings that were characterized by order and simplicity, conveying a cool and impersonal quality accomplished by specific strategies: the preference for canvases of monumental scale; the use of large geometric forms for visual stimuli; the application of color(2,5),(999,994)

“Elbert Jackson L.A.M.F., Part II” reflects Williams' preoccupation with the tenets of minimalism, although several aspects of the painting—the complex interplanar relationships of its mechanically drawn forms, the title's seeming reference to someone known by the artist, and its broad range of color—demonstrate how he utilized the attendant strategies to imaginative effect.

Though he was successful with minimalistic strategies, Williams was eager to convey his personal history in his art. It was this urge that led him to shift direction in his approach. Between 1971 and 1977, he executed a series of paintings that, in their signification of meaning and surface tactility, were in marked contrast to his previous art. "Indian Summer" shows that Williams has asserted his presence in his new work through distinctive markings—rhythmic brush strokes contained within subtle geometric partitions covering the entire surface of the painting. His sense of color has been subdued, yet the whole painting shimmers like a precious object due to the inclusion of pearlescent or metallic additives in the purple and raw umber pigment mix.

Williams began another series of paintings in 1978 that evoke veiled reminiscences of the parched landscape of his rural birthplace and, in some instances, textile design patterns that he studied during a trip to Nigeria. Using brushes and palette knives, he covered several canvases with layers of paint and precipitated chalk that were kept wet while they were applied. As observed in "Savannah," with its earth tones, this wet-into-wet technique causes cracks in the surface of the paintings, which are encrusted with color.

In a contemporary review of these paintings for the Village Voice when they were shown at New York's Touchstone Gallery, Judith Wilson stated: "William T. Williams' paintings don't apologize for their good looks, won't hide their ambition by playing dumb, and aren't ashamed to show some emotion. Their beauty is serious and hard won, yet essentially mysterious. As a group, they offer shrewd variations on a single theme, but each canvas leads a life of its own."

What is immediately striking about the subsequent series, created by Williams from 1983 to 1985, is the use of imprints of his own gloved, upraised hand, which has been repeatedly placed in different areas of each composition. Close scrutiny of "A Note to Marcel Proust" reveals that in the creation of this series of paintings, the artist abandoned the traditional tools of the medium and poured color onto the canvases in a controlled manner, allowing it to drip down their length.

The paintings in this series were included in a recent exhibition at the New Jersey State Museum. Curator Alison Weld provided the fol-
William T. Williams is the first African-American artist to be discussed in the History of Art by H.W. Janson, the bible of many college art history courses. Following comment on them in the show’s catalog: “... the paintings’ serial grid structures are formed by a laying on of the hands, an act understood by many to be imbued with religious meaning. As acts of transference and of healing, these works may be viewed as metaphors for spiritual communication. Williams marries the language of the abstract expressionist tradition with the collective beliefs and responses of his Southern heritage. This spiritual metaphor transports to another arena the abstract expressionist act of transferring the artist’s psyche onto the canvas to create a record of an emotional performance. ...” Williams was, to some extent, reverting to the abstract expressionism that had motivated minimalism, and in so doing, allowing his work to be interpreted in reference to himself.

For the last two years, Williams has been involved in a series that more emphatically unifies his personal and artistic history. The series includes paintings that each have passages of dark blue paint. According to Williams, the inspiration for this series was the building in Harlem where his aunt lived. “When you walked through the hallways there, at certain times, there was a blue light that would come through the window. It had a fascinating quality,” he says.

Like “Carolina Shout,” these paintings are composed of passages of various widths and lengths that display the different techniques of applying paint that Williams used in “Savannah” and “Indian Summer.” The basic colors he used are primary ones that, when juxtaposed with warm tones of ochre, green and orange, give the paintings an expressionistic quality. Well aware of himself as an expert colorist, Williams regards the resurgence of color in this series as “the result of a long and gradual move back to a full spectrum. It signifies a kind of rejoicing about my life.”

Williams’ work has continued to attract attention during his 20-year retreat from the commercialism of the art world. His work has been acquired by numerous collectors, among them the Chase Manhattan Bank, the Whitney Museum of Art and the Studio Museum in Harlem in New York; the Philip Morris Corporation in North Carolina; Yale University in Connecticut; and the Menil Foundation at Rice University in Texas.

He has also won several prestigious distinctions: He is the recipient of two NEA fellowships and a John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship; he is the first African-American artist to be discussed in the History of Art by H.W. Janson, the bible of many college art history courses; and he started an artists-in-residence program at the Studio Museum in Harlem that is still going strong. Kinshasha Conwill, executive director of the museum, says that the program “has become critical to the museum’s identity and its contribution to the larger art arena. I think Bill’s role as one of the initiators was very important and one that has had a long-standing effect. It’s indicative of the fact that he has had a kind of generosity of spirit that has led to the enrichment of a broader dialogue on black artists.”

Numerous exhibitions throughout the country have included his paintings, and a couple of those shows traveled to China and Japan. Starting in October 1991, his paintings will be on exhibit at the Montclair Art Museum in Montclair, N.J., until January 1992.

When viewing Williams’ art, will the audience understand the personal content in his rich and complex paintings? Will they see a man who lives in a loft in the SoHo district of Manhattan with his wife and two children? A man who is respected as much for his talent as he is for his commitment to helping young artists?

The iconography or personal references in Williams’ art are not necessarily intended to be obvious to the viewer. Knowing what his concerns were at the time he painted “Indian Summer,” for example, might suggest that the work has something to do with a pleasant period in his past. It might call to mind the image of light flickering across the dewy surface of a landscape. With this knowledge, and in those instances when we are not provided with any information, the abstract imagery in Williams’ art can conjure up many different things without ever being explicit with regard to what it is really about.

Discussing his concern as to whether or not his audience understands the personal content in his paintings, Williams explains, “The struggle for me is always between specific imagery and the painting being able to have a life of its own that’s independent of that iconography. In terms of an audience, I’d like them to realize the context that the paintings are in; but it’s also important for them to know that, first and foremost, it’s always about a dialogue with the history of the medium, no matter what you do. You can’t get around that. I certainly don’t.”

“Every time I enter my studio and close the door to start to work, I have to confront Romy [Bearden], Manet, Tanner, Jake [Lawrence], Matisse and Picasso—all those people are there whispering in my ear.”

Valerie J. Mercer, a freelance writer living in New York, taught abstract art at Harvard University.