The Smokehouse Painters, 1968-70

Michel Oren

This account of the Smokehouse muralists might perhaps be equally well inscribed in the annals of African American abstract painting, in the records of the Black Arts Movement and other idealistic projects of the late 1960s, in the chronicles of Harlem, and in the varied history of artist-community relations in modern times. Certainly Smokehouse was ahead of its time in its

Fig. 1. Early Smokehouse project at Sylvan Court: “Thank you for giving our park back to us.”

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desire to bring together artists, architects, and the community for which the first two groups would design low-income housing. Even today the idea has not been completely realized. But in 1970 it seemed a logical extension of the group's work painting geometric abstractionist murals on tenement walls.

While still a graduate painting student at Yale, William T. Williams had concluded that artists ought to find a way to interact with the non-museum-going public. Around 1968 he secured modest funding and invited three other artists to join him in painting tenement walls in Harlem. These three were the sculptor Melvin Edwards, five years older and thus more established than either Williams or Guy Ciarcia, whom Williams had met five years earlier when both were students at Pratt, and Billy Rose, still a senior at Pratt. All the artists except Ciarcia were black. The name was suggested by the playwright Walter Jones, who had grown up with Williams in Fayetteville, North Carolina: The smokehouse's role in Southern culture—as a storehouse of goods through the winter or a lean time—seemed appropriate to what the group was attempting.
Edwards and Clarcia were from large extended families in Houston and Union City, New Jersey, respectively. Rose had grown up in the Bedford-Stuyvesant area of Brooklyn, although less is known about his background because he dropped out after the first year of painting and the other members are no longer in touch with him. Williams had come from an extended family in a rural area where it was traditional for people to help each other get the crops in. His family had moved to the black communities of Harlem and then South Jamaica, New York; he had worked in a women's detention center and at Yale had been aware of, though he had not taken, a course taught by Knox Martin in which students made a series of huge collages working collaboratively. These factors probably disposed the Smokehouse members to take an interest in social interactions, and to wonder what the role of color, design, and the manipulation of space might be in promoting such interactions within an environment such as Harlem.

Williams and Clarcia at the time were doing studio paint-
ing in a hard-edged style with the use of masking tape (Williams had been influenced by Al Held, his adviser at Yale), while Edwards, a former painter, was doing welded sculpture in the tradition of Gonzalez and David Smith. The Russian Constructivists, whose work lay far back in the history of both these styles, had had the notion that one could liberate people by modifying the spaces in which they lived and worked. However, it may be misleading to draw too close a parallel between this notion and the intentions of Smokehouse.1

Slightly preceding Smokehouse in bringing abstract mural painting to New York was an organization known as City Walls, which was active in lower Manhattan. White, middle-class, and generously funded, City Walls drew some concern from the Smokehouse people for what seemed to them the egotistic practice of projecting studio designs onto unrelated buildings ten stories high without consulting the people who would have to live or work among them.2 Smokehouse always sought input from neighborhood organizations before starting to work on a site. Its colors and graphics related specifically to the site's space. Rather than hire professionals to work on scaffolds, it hired local teenagers and the elderly to work together on sites at street level—that is, painted no more than fifteen feet off the ground. Its members worked anonymously.
If Smokehouse rejected most features of the City Walls model, there was another model that it rejected in another way. Chicago in 1967 had seen the creation of the Wall of Respect, a figurative mural done by black artists and charged with political meaning. But Smokehouse decided, in Edwards's words, that "it would be better if the work were not figurative in order to ... let the message be the change rather than put the information out which said why the world needed changing. Abstraction offered a way of letting the message be the actual change. We were interested in actually changing society, not preaching or converting people in the sense of missionarying." The change was to be brought about by making the environment "visually and aesthetically better and therefore more human. ... I don't mean what we were doing was a criticism of the Wall of Respect, our choosing to do differently. It was one of the options. ... There're traditional African dwellings which don't use figurative art, or minimally. And it informs and improves the quality of life in those places." 3

Figs. 3, 4. Early Smokehouse project at 132nd (or perhaps 137th) Street, at left. Below, the Smokehouse painters at Sylvan Court: l. to r., Melvin Edwards, Guy Ciarcia, Billy Rose, William T. Williams.

Photos courtesy of William T. Williams
It was natural for artists whose studio work was in an abstract mode to carry that mode out into the street. Their starting point was the recollection that art had functioned in a public arena in African societies and in the European Renaissance, and a belief that it might be made to do so again. "A work of art has to have a life that can encompass a larger body of people" than usually goes to museums and galleries, Williams thought, and turned his attention to the people of Harlem. "There's an aesthetic system that they're functioning in; there are indigenous folk art forms that they have grown up with. Can we stimulate them to begin to use these elements?" he wondered.

First it was necessary to involve the people. "Given the poor housing and overall social problems that we were confronted with, we felt that it was important that we also involve community people in helping us organize and build these things, so that there would be an element of time and emotional investment and ultimately a kind of self-pride in achievement." But this responsibility also brought home, at least for Williams, the need for the artists' self-restraint:

Fig. 5. In-process Smokehouse mural in the mini-park at E. 121st Street moves toward a group of card players in alley at left (location J on map on p. 519). The wall at left will later be painted silver (see Fig. 7).

Photo by William T. Williams
We had to win their trust that we were indeed trying to function as visual artists; we were not bringing a political perspective to what we were doing. We were just providing resources, and were willing to function as an extension of their ideas. We were not willing to function as an extension of political ideas, though. As a group of artists, we bring a basic aesthetic to whatever we’re doing. We were not willing to paint political slogans. We felt if someone wanted to do that it would be far more vital if they did it directly. We would show them how and where, but to do it ourselves…would have been dishonest on our part. Political art is always more powerful when indigenous people do it. To bring it from the outside, we would be functioning as provocateurs and that’s not what we wanted to do.

The abstract mode thus also represents the artists’ refusal to use directly political means in trying to empower these people. But “empower” is already too patronizing to accurately describe Williams’s intentions; rather, “our concern was to make them aware of their environment. How they used their new awareness of that environment was up to them.” Smokehouse would “bring psychological drama to a space” and even resolve the drama in its work, but “the specific interpretations were always left up to the people who lived there…And I shouldn’t speak for the group like that.”

Ciarcia believes that the work was deliberately left incomplete, with the subject matter omitted. “Our work was basically predicated, and the subject was the city moving in front of our work, and that completed it so whatever went on worked perfectly. We weren’t into making art but statements of color in the environment.” The artists tried to interact with “the color sense that came out of the ghetto” from people’s clothes, shop signs, or gold-framed baroque couches with red plush or zebra skins in a furniture store window. Not only was the work constantly in motion, as Ciarcia saw it, but the viewer-pedestrians—who were of course part of the work—were meant to be in motion as well, since the work was not meant to be viewed frontally but anamorphically or, more precisely, sequentially in a series of impressions while walking by it. The angles of masking tape were altered to make these sequences, which often led to other buildings, more dramatic. Silver paint, which seemed in the compressed city environment to recede infinitely, was used to push shapes in and out and to “create a hole in the environment almost like a time warp.” Photographs, which capture little of this experience, are thus somewhat misleading.

The neighborhood people did not seem very hopeful to Ciarcia, and he came at length to see the brightly colored walls as expressions of anguish and desolation. “I don’t know why they
turned into cubes and zig-zags, but that's basically what we were experiencing. . . . It was an attempt at bringing goodness and light to the neighborhood, but what came out was the result of our dialogues about racism and poverty." Did the walls attempt to mirror or to counter this situation? Both, thinks Ciarcia. To him the clashing colors represent the contradictions of the situation. The group's photographs always tried to point up "a bombed-out element, because we were working in environments that were the worst in the city," notes Williams. "It's like a crown of thorns between this new decorated space and that thing that's above—the whole idea of pain and pleasure."

In the short run at least Smokehouse made a dent in the neighborhoods in which it worked. At one site a group of teenagers began to paint their own wall in imitation of the artists. Sometimes paint would disappear—people were painting their apartment with it—, and the group would feel their efforts to be successful, for change was going on. Sometimes people painted fire hydrants yellow or purple or covered their

Fig. 6. Mel Edwards's sculpture seen against mural painting in E. 121st Street mini-park (location H on p. 519).
porches with garish colors in imitation of Smokehouse painting. Three kids stopped and looked at the wall—it was a big orange section—and "just simultaneously broke into this nutty dance. We were rolling," Ciarclia recalls. Once "these old people came to us and said, just in the most heartfelt way—it brings tears to my eyes—they said, 'Thank you for giving our park back to us.' " The junkies who had taken over the park abandoned it as flashes of bright color appeared on the surrounding walls. Smokehouse's efforts seemed to attract better service for the community from the sanitation and fire departments and from social service agencies.

In the long run the murals did not solve Harlem's problems but served as models, as Edwards says, "like notes in a notebook on society" for what could be. However, it took Smokehouse a while to realize this would be the case. The group had started with a flat style which rapidly became more sophisticated in its ability to suggest three-dimensionality. Working summers only for probably three years, they completed a park, the side of a firehouse, a wall next to a Transit Authority power plant, a complex of street fronts and alleyways—perhaps six projects in all (Figs. 1, 3, 4). Various foundations supplied small grants, and a support network of old classmates from Pratt and Yale pressured manufacturers and builders to donate paints, materials, and services. In

Fig. 7. Silver paint, which seemed to recede infinitely, was used to push shapes in and out (location K on p. 519).
completing and celebrating these projects, Smokehouse brought to the community poets, musicians, photographers, architects—a peripheral group of artists who became known as Smokehouse Associates. Twice at least Smokehouse did slide presentations about its work for art world audiences at Cooper Union and the School of Visual Arts. Edwards remembers these as partly performances or happenings and recalls throwing black-eyed peas into the darkened audience to provoke them and give them contact with "an example of African culture transposed to here."

The last walls the group painted—a complex of panels in an Hispanic area on 121st Street between Third and Second Avenues whose colors and angles echoed each other and the signs and buildings and so unified the neighborhood—showed the increasing scope and ambition of the group’s work (see map, p. 519). This complex included a series of connected yards and alleyways from which trash had been removed and which was then made into a “mini-park” by being embellished with four tons of spread gravel and sculptures by Edwards and Williams—an extension of their work from the public arena of storefronts into pri-
Fig. 8. E. 121st Street complex of mural panels, and mini-park with murals and sculptures. Illustrated and otherwise significant features are as follows.

A. Mural at southeast corner of E. 121st Street and Third Avenue (pp. 527, 528).

B. Mural at northeast corner (pp. 524, 525, 526).

C. Mural above Berg's Supermarket (pp. 524-25).

D. Community center.

E. Library (Larry Rockefeller's headquarters).

F. Corridor leading to mini-park (pp. 510-11).

G. Mini-park murals (p. 521).

H. Edwards's sculpture (pp. 516, 522-23).

I. Mini-park murals (pp. 514-15).

J. Card players and table in alley (pp. 514, 530).

K. Wall painted silver to left of alley (pp. 517-18).

(Map based on sketches by William T. Williams and Guy Ciarcia)
vate residential spaces. The sculptures adjoined a neighborhood library and a community center in which a Vista volunteer, Larry Rockefeller, had an office. The neighborhood association had invited Smokehouse to do the work and had partly funded it.

Typically, each week a different Smokehouse member would be in charge of developing the overall design for an area and would arrive with a sketch, which was then stretched or compressed to fit the space. Or the sketch would be modified because a wall was not perpendicular to the ground, or because a person hired locally had painted a line going crosswise to what had been planned. "We would just adjust to that and integrate it into what we were doing, because the work factor, the process was more important ultimately than the specific design," Williams notes. Colors were chosen to complement the neighborhood, and in their enthusiasm the artists painted on each other's assigned spaces. Later walls might be keyed to one painted earlier, so that "it would be like a jazz band, and everyone would have to improvise in relation to that wall to make the whole thing come together," says Williams. Precise colors and angles were discussed endlessly, and Clarcia thinks that, "for every hour we spent painting, we must have spent three hours talking about what we were going to do next."

A final project, proposed to the Board of Education but never executed, shows the Smokehouse painters moving toward greater professionalization and control. They photographed the entire area around a school on 116th Street and on the blowups pasted their proposed designs to help sponsors visualize the finished project (Figs. 17, 19). For walls much higher than any they had yet attempted, they proposed to bring in a professional scaffolding person to apply the paint. Lighter and more elegant than previous Smokehouse work, these designs yet maintained the group's concern for the architectonic features of the urban environment.

Around this time, in 1970, photographs of Smokehouse work were shown together with that of City Walls at the Jewish Museum. In the catalogue Dore Ashton wrote of Smokehouse that they approach the life of the community from every direction, carefully documenting the results of past activities, and building toward a totally integrated social scheme. The tremendous ambition evidenced by the Smokehouse group may be measured by their frequent references to other cultures (African, Oriental, and pre-Columbian) which they feel successfully created habitable environments in every sense—physical as well as spiritual.
Why then at the moment when they had achieved greatest control of their work and appropriate recognition did Smokehouse begin to disintegrate? For one thing, the artists' professional careers began to gather momentum. Edwards had three young daughters to support and took a teaching job out of the city, while Williams had almost more than he could handle teaching while preparing for his first one-man show. Clarcla would have liked to continue and had ideas about using glitter and building brick abutments out from the walls to manipulate space still further. But—a second factor—it had become a constant struggle for Williams to raise funds from foundations, and the enterprise showed no signs of becoming self-sustaining. And finally, the problems that Smokehouse had addressed began to seem overwhelming: "There is this need to put art in the public context," Williams agreed. But "how long can you paint it on a building that's going to be ripped down within five or ten years? When does the concept then shift to working with architects from the initial stage?" For Edwards, after 1970

the biggest problem was not whether we could make effective art but whether we could change the society enough that it could be effective as

Fig. 9. Two boys take justifiable pride in the mini-park murals (they stand at letter G on the map on p. 519).

Photo by Guy Clarcla
a whole, because if you paint walls or even build new buildings and you don’t have a structure which takes care of all of the aspects of people’s lives, employment, food, clothing, and shelter of a decent level for everybody, then everything deteriorates anyway. So you can go back and look at a wall and the paint’s peeling. Well, the paint peels because of phenomena, but at the same time it doesn’t get repainted because there’s not that cohesion in the society. Or it didn’t start out to be made in mosaics or something permanent because you don’t have that relationship with that kind of social control and wherewithal. We analyzed what we were doing and essentially decided we were painting on tenement walls but the system which created tenements was more dynamic than our chance to make things different than that.

However, the Smokehouse members did not lose their interest in the public context. Over the years Claricia worked with another artist to paint a series of geometric abstractionist murals in Trenton, New Jersey, while since 1980 Edwards has installed six major public sculptures in various parts of the country. Williams worked with a landscape architect group which had designed a park on New York’s Upper West Side but found them reluctant to give an artist any real area of authority and thus to allow a true collaboration. In the late ’70s Williams and Edwards prepared a proposal to bring art into public housing for Patricia Harris,
Secretary of Housing and Urban Development. With the architect Joe Black and the painter Ed Clark, who had grown up with Harris, they went to Washington to present it to her. They suggested that legislation already on the books authorized a possible one per cent of costs for art in federal housing, that art could humanize the housing, and that art in the courtyard of the Dunbar Houses in Harlem, built in the 1940s, had established a useful precedent.

Harris was quite taken with the idea and promised to have her lawyers look into it, according to Williams. He and Edwards did not personally benefit from their proposal to Harris. She introduced them to some Washington design firms with similar interests, but fearing to be distracted from their studio work and unwilling to move to Washington, they decided not to explore possible collaborations.6

The position of two Smokehouse members, Williams and Ciarcia, deserves attention, the first because he solicited and administered the funds, the second as a white member of an otherwise black group. Smokehouse differed from most other artists' groups in that its members were employed by the group and paid, although meagerly, from various funds collected from foundations. Williams was perhaps the only group member with the contacts and skills to be able to raise...
this money. Williams recalls that how much was to be spent on each wall was decided by the group. Despite such attempts to make Smokehouse unhierarchical and despite the fact that Clarcia had not expected to be paid when he agreed to paint walls, he now thinks that "Mel and I were subordinate to Bill, just by the fact that he got the funding."

What was the idea of inviting a white artist into a black group in Harlem? "I don't think that was the way the idea went," Edwards corrects. "Guy was somebody who'd gone to school with William, and they had exchanged ideas for some time. . . . We didn't consciously go and find a white artist to be sure we had one. William knew him better than he knew me at that point." Williams says that he had watched Clarcia's work over a long period and had come to prize his understanding of Italian Renaissance painting and sculpture, just as he valued Edwards's knowledge of African indigenous architecture and Billy Rose's promise and enthusiasm.

Clarcia isn't certain why he was chosen, but anyway, "Well, I'm just as terrific as anybody else and I belonged there." He takes credit for having introduced the use of rollers to speed up painting cement walls, though brushes were still needed to get in the crannies when the walls were brick. He doubts that he was
chosen so that Smokehouse could be called an integrated group and as such made more attractive, at that moment, for funding. That there was resentment over the choice of Ciarcia can be seen, he says, from the fact that Joe Overstreet, a black painter earlier affiliated with the Umbra poets who would have liked to have been hired by Smokehouse, made an "ugly scene" about it in a bar. For Ciarcia, already teaching in a black school in Trenton,

It was one of the most incredible opportunities of my life because I got to see how part of another culture lived. . . . Bill and Mel kind of weaned me out of my lily white frame of thought into understanding some of the problems and even ethics of black people. . . . I had to shape up as a human being. I really believed that black people didn't go to museums, things like that, and I would get into a big discussion. I remember where it happened, on a corner of 121st and Third Avenue, and Bill and I were waiting for Mel and the subject of museum funding came up, and I said something stupid like, "Who goes to museums up here?" And I got my lesson. It was a million little things like that.

It is worth remembering that this patient education was going on at the very height of what later came to be called the Black

Figs. 12, 13. The wall above Berg's Supermarket on E. 121st Street, seen in both pictures, continues the line of the triangle at street level, seen in photo at right (letters B and C on map on p. 519).

Photos by Robert Colton
Arts Movement, with its strong separatist currents and pressures on black artists to conform to them. This was a time when mixed couples split up and many black artists refused to address white audiences because of the conviction that whites were aware of and content with racist attitudes. Edwards includes Smokehouse within the Black Arts Movement, but Williams demurs. Taking an optimistic long-range view of African diaspora culture in which that movement's importance pales, Williams deprecates it as "a convenient handle that the press has attached to something at a given time" and a "divisive term [when] we as black people need an inclusive term rather than an exclusive term." He believes that the term does not do justice to the diversity of Afro-American opinion. To some Black Arts champions, a black abstract painter may have seemed not to answer to the political demands of the time, and Williams may

Figs. 14, 15. Below, the Smokehouse murals have become part of daily life in this Hispanic area of Harlem on E. 121st Street (letter B on map). The triangular motif is echoed in a mural across the street (letter A), seen at right and in Fig. 16.

Photos by Robert Colton
have suffered verbal abuse. It is worth noting that one of the Smokehouse Associates, the photographer Robert Colton, an old school friend from Pratt of both Williams and Clarcia, was white.

The proposal for what became Smokehouse which Williams had written at Yale had been one half of a proposal whose other half became the artist-in-residence program of the newly opened Studio Museum in Harlem. While directing this program, Williams organized at the Studio Museum in 1969 an exhibition of four abstract artists—Sam Gilliam, Mel Edwards, himself, and Stephan Kelsey, a white artist. The reaction to this show among elements of the black community is perhaps what Williams refers to in his 1976 statement to an interviewer.

I decided I wasn’t going to make any paintings, I was going to get involved in painting walls outside. I spent two summers painting walls throughout Harlem, because I wanted to think about something else at that particular point, thinking about what people were thinking about rather than that esoteric stuff that I had been involved in.  

However one sees this decision to include white artists at a moment when many black artists were excluding them, it is of a piece with his self-restraint toward students of that period: ‘I didn’t want to mold their minds politically. I only want to bring ideas, and place them on the table in an objective manner. I

Figs. 16, 17. A Smokehouse wall on E. 121st Street, below (letter A on map). At right, a mock-up for the unrealized 116th Street project shows the group moving toward greater scale and dynamism.
Figs. 18, 19. The motif of parallel bars used in the mini-park murals, above, was carried forward with greater elegance in the mock-ups for the unrealized 116th Street project, at lower right.

don't want my weaknesses and my biases and my failures in life to be their dreams of tomorrow. That would be dishonest on my part. . . . It's a matter of realizing that what other people can achieve has to do with their innate human qualities." Evidently this is a politics that intervenes only to urge hesitation and awareness, that in its desire to empower makes negligible the exercise of its own power, and that in its unwavering vision of utopian openness and possibility recapitulates a primary characteristic of the historical avant-garde.9

Notes

1 Edwards points out that he grew up in Texas and went to school in California, so that his sources were more directly the murals of the black Houston painter John Biggers and of the Mexican painters, although all of these were aware of Constructivism. Williams would disclaim the implied coercive or patronizing or even didactic intentions of the Constructivists.


3 All quotes and most of the information in this article are drawn from transcripts of interviews done with William T. Williams (Mar. 11, 1988), Melvin Edwards (Oct. 23, 1988), and Guy Clarcia (Aug. 18, 1988) at their
homes in New York City (Williams and Edwards) and Hopewell, N. J. (Clarcia). In addition, Clarcia suggested a page layout for this article that attempted to be consonant with the spatial effects of the original painted walls. The author wishes to thank the artists for their helpfulness and patience.

4 "Using Walls (Outdoors)."

5 The group was Michael Paul Friedberg Associates. The piece that Williams executed, a three-dimensional structure of aluminum squares with silk-screened or baked-enamel designs, was installed in the early 1970s. It no longer exists.

6 According to a HUD spokesperson, a policy of funding art in federally financed housing had been in effect for twenty years previous to Harris's administration (1977-80), but the decision whether to budget for it was always up to local housing authorities who actually built the housing. The visit to Harris must have taken place in 1977, since Joe Black died shortly after and Edwards's sculpture Homage to Joe Black dates from 1977.

7 Williams comments, "At no point did Joe Overstreet ever approach me about being a member or participating in Smokehouse." Overstreet did speak with him about the Studio Museum.

8 The interviewer was Camille Billops. Transcript of interview courtesy Hatch-Billops Collection, New York.

9 At Williams's request a few personal details about him have been excised from this account, which in rough draft he found too gossipy and tending to overemphasize racial dynamics. In a couple of cases, diverging recollections by Williams and Clarcia have been reconciled in ways acceptable to both. Edwards did not comment on the draft of the article.