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## William T. Williams Joins Michael Rosenfeld in New York, Gaining Gallery Representation for the First Time in 40 Years

by VICTORIA L. VALENTINE on Nov 28, 2016 • 11:04 pm

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WILLIAM T. WILLIAMS, "Truckin.," 1969 (acrylic on cotton canvas). | via Swann Auction Galleries

A SINGLE PAINTING GREETs VISITORS when they enter the fourth-floor visual art galleries at the new National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC) in Washington, D.C. The large-scale, abstract geometric painting, a captivating mix of color and composition, is by **William T. Williams** (b.1942). Mounted on a navy blue wall, "Truckin.," (1969) is presented adjacent to text introducing visitors to the gallery, an exploration of the American experience through art. A century in the making, the Smithsonian museum has been long anticipated and for those with an interest in African American art, the debut of the dedicated gallery on the National Mall is an important milestone on the long path to institutional and critical recognition of the value and contributions of African American visual artists.



Williams emerged in the late 1960s after earning an MFA from Yale. His contemporaries include Sam Gilliam, Edward Clark, Frank Bowling, and Alvin Loving, fellow African American artists pursuing abstraction who are also represented in the collection of the Smithsonian African American museum. The collection includes more than 150 works of art. That the museum's curators chose Williams's work to open the exhibition is a significant gesture. Another came last week when Michael Rosenfeld Gallery in New York [announced its representation](#) of Williams.

"I am honored to represent William T. Williams, one of the most significant abstract painters of his generation. Bill is an artist—and man of tremendous integrity—that has produced, from decade to decade, an extraordinary body of abstraction," Gallery Owner Michael Rosenfeld said in a statement to Culture Type. "It is my hope and desire to expand his audience by placing his work in significant public and private collections in the United States and abroad; he is also long-overdue for a major retrospective. Many know of one kind of Bill's abstraction but he has evolved—from series to series—and we want to expose his breadth and depth."

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WILLIAM T. WILLIAMS, "Du-Drop (Roller Series)," 1979 (acrylic on canvas). | © William T. Williams; Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY

According to the gallery, it is the first to represent Williams since the 1970s. Its extensive roster also includes Betye Saar, Barbara Chase Riboud, and the estates of Norman Lewis, Benny Andrews and Bob Thompson. Michael Rosenfeld also owns significant works by Alma Thomas, an important artist it has championed.

In announcing its representation of Williams, the gallery described the development of his practice over the years and how he expresses personal, political and cultural narratives through abstraction:



William T. Williams Joins Michael Rosenfeld in New York, Gaining Gallery Representation for the First Time in 40 Years



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"William T. Williams work ranges in style from his early geometric abstractions, to almost-monochromatic explorations of texture, to an abstraction that derives its force from productive tension among colors and forms. While he has consistently tested the limits of his earlier styles and developed new approaches, his meticulous attention to the process of art making has remained constant. A master of brushwork and color, Williams creates his paintings in series, working through a labor-intensive process that often includes drawings, watercolors, and prints.

"From the outset of his career, Williams's art was characterized by bold color and daring compositions that paid homage to and challenged the abstraction that had come before it. He emerged at a time when abstract expressionism was in decline, while pop art, color field painting, and minimalism were on the rise. Concurrent with this aesthetic transition were social and political transformations that saw artists, intellectuals, and activists challenging the exclusionary practices of New York's white- and male-dominated art institutions. These critiques came in multiple forms, including an approach to art that favored figural representation embedded in a politics of struggle and an assertion of identities misrepresented by or excluded from American culture. Such images were a necessary correction to a history of omission and caricature, but they risked being received by the art establishment in a way that affirmed its tendency to ignore work by abstract artists who were also African American.

"Living in an artist loft building on Broadway that over the years included neighbors Kenneth Noland, Joel Shapiro, Janet Fish, and William Copley, Williams believed that abstraction offered him greater creative and expressive freedom than figural representation, but he was also wary of the potential cold, impersonal aspect of painting that was merely about painting. Williams thus developed an approach that rendered the abstract representational, not only through titles replete with autobiographical references, but also in the shapes he incorporates. These shapes resonate with cultural history and personal memories of a childhood spent in the northern, urban environments of New York as well as the southern landscapes of rural North Carolina. Jazz, too, became an important site of convergence where memory, history, and a black American abstract tradition met. Finally, quilting was for Williams another manifestation of an African American tradition of abstraction."

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— Michael Rosenfeld Gallery



WILLIAM T. WILLIAMS, "Blue Nite (Shimmer Series)," 1974 (acrylic on canvas). | © William T. Williams. Courtesy Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY



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WILLIAMS WAS BORN IN RURAL CROSS CREEK, N.C., and raised in New York, where he still lives and works, splitting his time between the city and Connecticut. For four decades, Williams was a professor of art at the City University of New York's Brooklyn College. Over the course of his career, he has received prestigious awards, and his work has been exhibited widely and is represented in numerous museum collections.

In recent years, his paintings have been offered at Swann Auction Galleries. "Eastern Star" graced the cover of its February 21012 African American fine art catalog. In June 2014, "Truckin" appeared at Swann. The lot was estimated to sell for \$70,000 to \$100,000 and exceeded expectations garnering \$137,000 (including fees). Its appearance at the Smithsonian has certainly exposed Williams to a broader American audience.

To further his exposure, Michael Rosenfeld plans to focus more specifically on the American art market and international collectors. In March 2017, the gallery is presenting a solo exhibition of his work, which will be accompanied by a fully illustrated catalog. But first, Williams is debuting at Art Basel Miami Beach (Dec. 1-4). The Michael Rosenfeld booth is featuring four paintings and several works on paper by the artist. According to the gallery, it's the first time Williams's work is being presented at ABMB.

Rosenfeld said he is excited about bringing Williams's work to the Miami fair: "We anticipate an enthusiastic response like the response we have been experiencing in the gallery. For the last several months as we have been preparing to announce our representation, daily collectors and museum professionals have all been looking and reacting favorably. A master colorist, his language is immediate and universal." CT



WILLIAM T. WILLIAMS, "Taking It Home (111 1/2 Series)," 1999 (acrylic on canvas). | © William T. Williams. Courtesy Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY

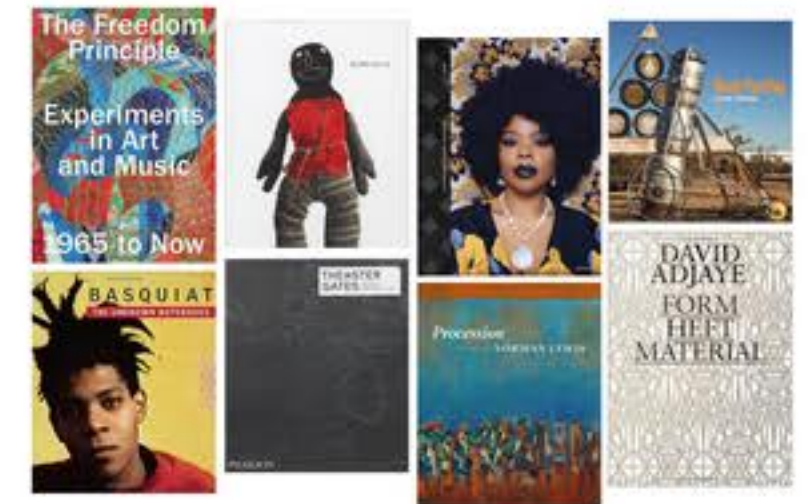
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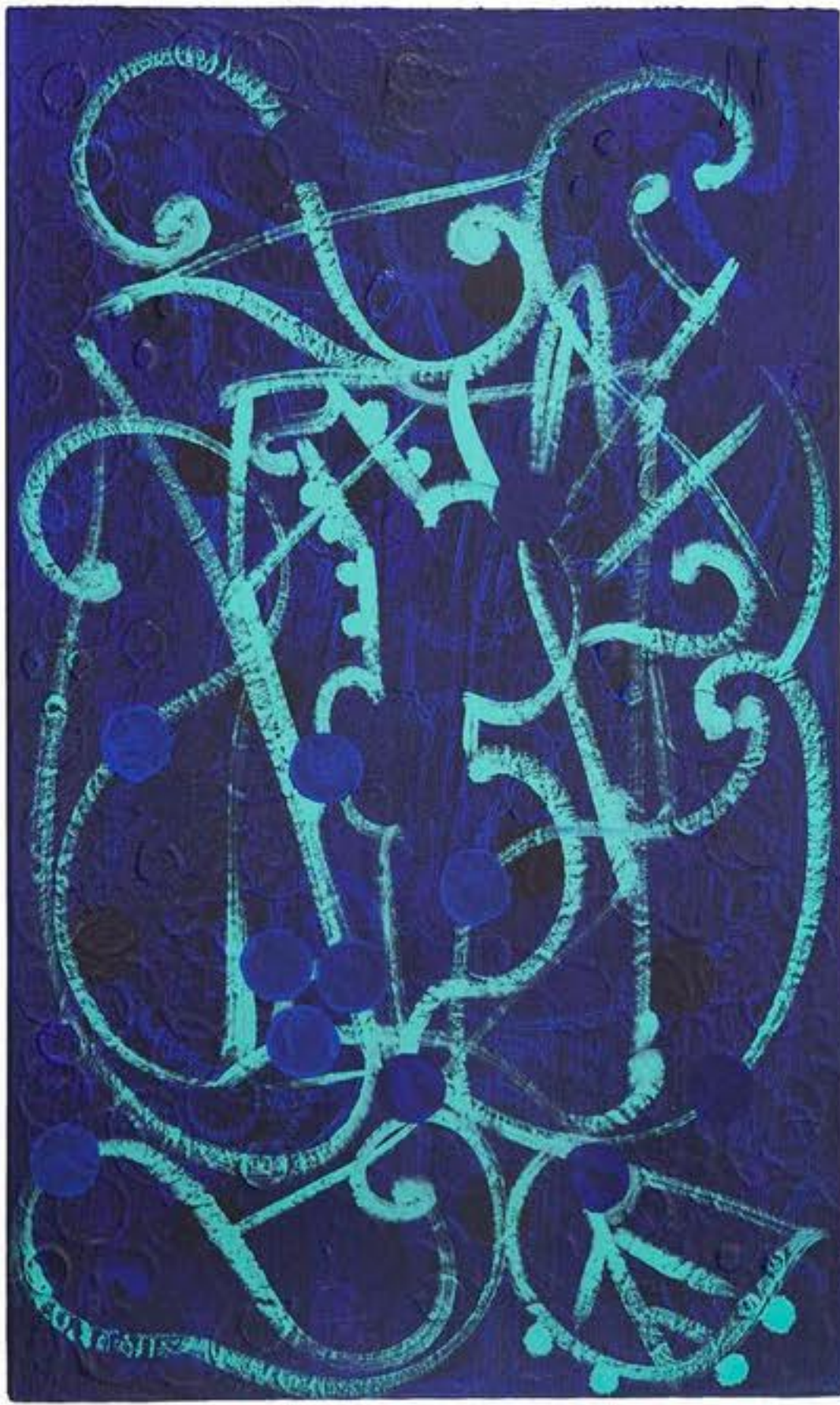


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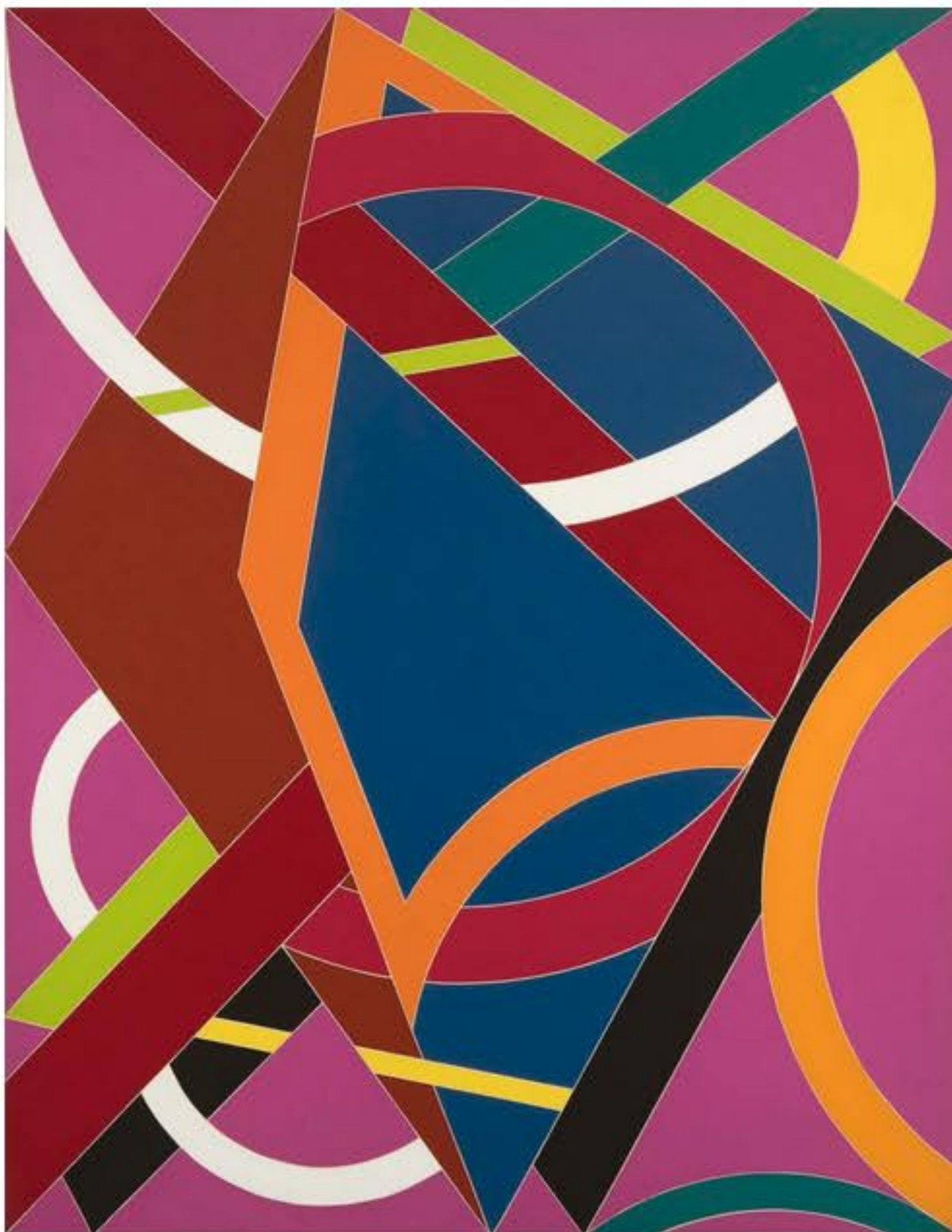


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WILLIAM T. WILLIAMS, "Blue Debate (Blue Line Series)," 2007 (acrylic on canvas). | © William T. Williams; Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY



WILLIAM T. WILLIAMS, "Trane Meets Jug," 1970-71 (acrylic on canvas). | © William T. Williams; Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY