MASTER COLORIST

African-American painter added new shades of meaning to '70s art

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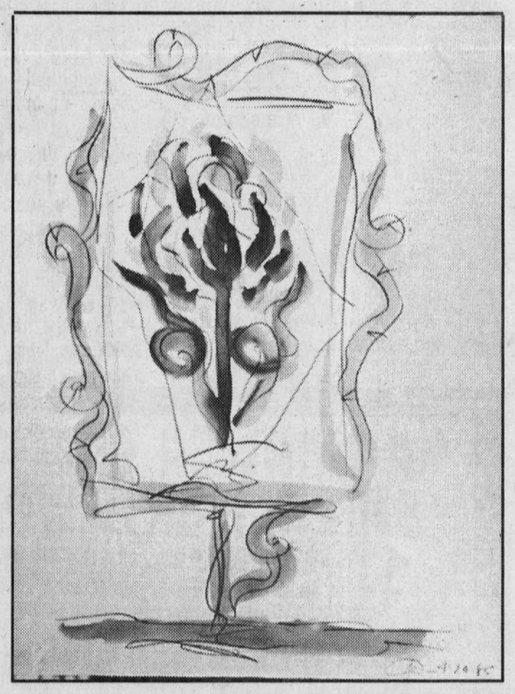
Art

His name was vaguely familiar from the 1970s. That's when William T. Williams got the attention of the New York art world by adding illusions and irrational elements to the until-then rigid sphere of geometric art.

He sold out his first one-person show at a New York gallery in 1971. The Museum of Modern Art and many of its trustees were the buyers.

Williams also got attention because he was African-American. The '70s were the days of clenched-fist confrontations between artists and museums that rarely admitted contemporary works by black artists into their hallowed precincts. Williams was acceptable because his art was good, undeniably good. He and a few equally acceptable peers were impossible to ignore. They were groundbreakers.

Meeting Williams and seeing his art in 1994, now at the Sherry Washington Gallery in Detroit, one can understand why he made waves. Williams is a superb colorist. He infuses his personal history, cultural heritage and feelings easily into his rhythmic, pulsing abstract color structures. His Matisse-like line drawings are unassuming odes.



"Half Tide," a graphic/acrylic wash on paper, is one of the William T. Williams works on display at the Sherry Washington Gallery in Detroit.

He should be celebrated for finding a way to add content and human relevance to esoteric, dry art styles of the '70s. He, and his African-American peers should be accorded a place in the history of American art of that decade for expanding its scope.

"I think I made some important contributions to art in the '60s and '70s, contributions that had to do with new ways of looking at color and new ways of structuring color to create spatial volume," Williams says.

A measure of Williams' success is the fact that his paintings are still enchanting. Sadly, Sherry Washington isn't showing any of Williams' paint-laden abstractions that have the life-encrusted surfaces of African masks in their improvisational harmony. Those paintings are a continuum of African-American experiences.

But Washington is, in this survey of his works on paper, introducing us to the underlying themes of Williams art.

"This is the playful side of me," Williams says of what is in the exhibit. "The drawings are important to me. These are some of my best."

Williams, 51, was born in North Carolina. He spent summers there, but most of the year he lived in New York City. He studied art first at Pratt Institute, then got his master's from Yale University in 1968. He still lives and works in New York City.

"The duality of experience, having grown up in an urban environment and a rural one, those two things always tug at your sensibility," says Williams. "Hopefully I've merged the two."

The early dynamics

There are four watercolors from the early '70s in the exhibit which evoke urban congestion and energy as well as rural stability and a quality of light only found in the country. They are of dynamic, intersecting geometric forms filled in with expressive, prismatic colors — mostly primary colors with some secondary ones thrown in for dissonance. Williams puts colors together magically.

"Color is important because it is a carrier of so much emotional power," he says. "Finding, say, the specific blue I need is critical. I may have seen the blue in my mind and in the world. It is the fullness of a blue experience you want in a color."

The color traps light. It is also affected by the color next to it, under it or over it.

These early works take Williams' characteristic form. "The diamond in the box is a form I've been using since 1967, over and over again. It allowed me to explore the boundaries of shape dynamics in a rectangle. It is a shape I saw constantly in the South, in quilts."

The diamond shape is tipped, creating the illusion of deeper space. The diamond is the central form, suggesting the centering provided by home, by family, by the earth. Other forms become improvisational offshoots, like a jazz performance.

"One aspect of jazz that interested me in the late '60s was its complexity, especially its complex polyrhythmic structure. I was also interested in jazz because it was a reassertion of cultural identity. I grew up in a family where there were musicians, and I listened to music every night."

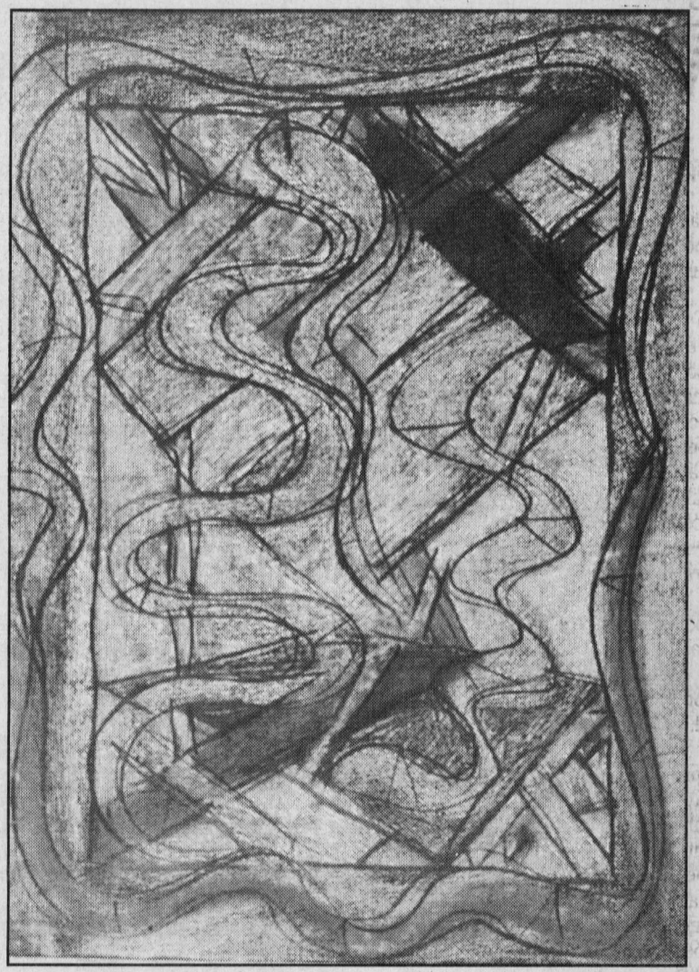
The flowering later

Williams works to jazz. He will listen to one recording over and over as he paints, until he begins to think and work with a similar improvisational rhythm. "Music is a fleeting moment that moves us. Maybe taking light and capturing that fleeting moment of light that can be trapped on a piece of paper is similar."

A later series of drawings in the Washington exhibit begins with a more specific image. It is a theme on which he does many variations.

"My grandmother had a large flower garden that surrounded her house on two sides," Williams says. "In the spring she'd plant the seeds and take the seed bags and put them on a stick and stick them in the ground."

Those flower packs on sticks take different forms in Williams' works. The image allows Williams to explore color, expressive line and a natural form inside a geometric one. It is also an image of homage to Williams' grandmother, to the seed that produces a plant that is food, to the simple ritual of planting. It is an act of faith, a gesture of survival.



"Ellington No. 24," a crayon on paper artwork, shows William T. Williams' mastery of expressive colors.

ON DISPLAY: *The exhibit continues through Aug. 20 at 1274 Library, Detroit. The gallery is open 10-5 Tue.-Fri.; noon-5 Sat. For more information call 1-313-961-4500.*