

# He's 'A Color Painter To Watch'

William T. Williams is a noted young black artist who can look back now on an exhibition record that takes in almost every place but his home state of North Carolina.

His paintings have been included in a number of important group shows at New York museums and elsewhere, including the "Structure of Color" show at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1971. That same year he had a one-man show at the Reese Palley Gallery in New York City. His work has been shown in France and Germany. The Museum of Modern Art acquired one of his paintings when he was 24.

"Life" magazine cited him as a color painter to watch in the 1970s, along with Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski and Elsworth Kelly. He teaches regularly at Brooklyn College; and he has been artist-in-residence at the Minneapolis College of Art and Design, the University of Delaware and the University of the State of New York. He belongs to the blue-ribbon artists' committee that runs the Skowhegan (Me.) School of Painting and Sculpture.

When it comes to North Carolina, though, his professional contact has been limited to a brief engagement as a consultant to the North Carolina Arts Council on a project to open a gallery in the black community of Raleigh.

FOR MANY upcoming artists of course a lack of representation back home, in a state off the main exhibition circuit, might not matter much. But North Carolina seems to hold a

## Art

by  
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special place with Williams. During a recent interview in the rolling wooded country of central Maine he took several occasions to remark on the beauty of his native state.

Though he left North Carolina for New York in early childhood he made regular return trips to visit his many relatives in Fayetteville. As a teen-ager he spent summers at his grandmother's farm there, helping with the cotton and tobacco crops. It was hard labor and Williams's cousin the noted writer and actor Walter Jones, writing about the painter's early experience in "Arts" magazine several years ago, conveyed the impression that the framework was onerous. Williams did not find it so, however.

"I always enjoyed it," he said. "It was doing something in the open after concrete and square buildings and polluted air."

"North Carolina is a very beautiful place. I always wanted to go back and do something in North Carolina."

WILLIAMS IS a softspoken man with a gentle manner, readily disposed to take the light view of personal hardship, making it sound as though he had done something faintly ridiculous in holding down two jobs at once plus a scholarship in attending Pratt Institute.

Jones had written that it is hard enough for anyone to get far enough out from under this society to become an artist, and for a black artist much harder still. He said that he personally was not sure that any blacks had made it yet into the first rank of artists but he thought Williams might be one to do it. What emerged from William's account of his life was the problem of finding himself in the wrong place, the dead-end job, the unrewarding classes, with no inkling of alternatives.

After entering Pratt, for instance, with funds borrowed by his father, a retired Army chauffeur, and his mother, a domestic, he did not find his way into the fine arts program for several months, until after a chance visit to Al Blaustein's printmaking class where the concern for self-expression immediately struck home with him. Before then he had been in advertising.

"I wanted to make money, he said. "That was my orientation at that time. I didn't want to go back to a farm. I didn't want to go back to a New York City housing project. I equated college with jobs and money. I had a trade school orientation at that time, no notion of a liberal arts education."

SINCE THEN Williams has been able to note a number of critical points in his career, when he has had help in getting his head straight, as he puts it. At Skowhegan, where he spent a summer as a scholarship student, for instance, he learned to ease his hangups about racism and art world politics; for the first time in his life he found an environment where art came absolutely first, where everyone started even, he said.

His meeting with Donald Judd at the Yale University graduate school marked another turning point.

"Judd kind of singlehandedly took me out of the 1950s, all the expressionism and other stuff, and showed me what was MINE in what I was doing and what was other people's," Williams said.

In his Skowhegan studio Williams was working on two paintings of interlocking geometric forms with a surface effect in the painting akin to that of galvanized metal, a flip-of-the-wrist, back-and-forth brush stroke.

"I'm into a surface which is illusionistic, that has the illusion

of texture but has no physical texture," he said.

"I don't want to make painting where paint is a deposit on the surface, where paint is physical."

"Even the very strict geometry, the rigid forms soften up because of what the surface does, which has its own illusions and kind of contradicts the form."

"It's a way of getting to a more painterly sensation without getting back to abstract expressionism, moving back and through and beyond the 60s, the deductive reasoning of the 60s."

Williams stands well apart from color field painters who use what he calls a "pop Hollywood palette, red, blue and green squeezed right from the tube."

He mixes complementaries together, adding green to a passage of rose red for instance, and thus creating a certain dullness in the tone, a resonance that grows on the viewer.

"I am interested in colors that are on the verge of becoming mud," he said. "Just before they become mud, they have this beautiful, warm, earthy quality to them."



William T. Williams  
Rising Artist



'Sweets Crane' By Williams