

SPIRIT AND CHANCE

The informed lifeline of
William T. Williams

BY HOBEY ECHLIN

It's a rare treat when a local gallery can host a show by an important American artist whose work is usually reserved for museum and traveling group shows. The Sherry Washington Gallery has been blessed with just that in the William T. Williams show, an admirable feat for both the artist and the downtown Detroit gallery.

Williams, a New York-based painting and drawing teacher at Brooklyn College, has exhibited with the likes of Willem de Kooning and Mark Rothko at places like New York's Museum of Modern Art, concentrating more on his role as an artist-educator than maintaining commercial viability. But in this summerlong retrospective, Williams is preserving the spirit and chance that has inspired his career since it began over 30 years ago.

"I hoped that in showing with Sherry, there might be the chance for a young artist to spark something in their lives, as art has helped my life. It's important for me to show work in other contexts," says Williams by phone from New York.

As an M.F.A. student at Yale in the late 1960s, Williams found his own life-spark in the dual influences and tutelage of figurative artists like Alex Katz, and the linear sensibilities of abstract artists like de Kooning. The unlikely marriage of these genres (the organic realism of figurative art with the usually cold formalism of abstraction) accounts for what Williams describes humbly as "the ability to draw an informed line."

And it is this "informed line," from rare lithographs to even rarer sketchbook drawings, that Williams and Washington have assembled for his exhibit. In these pieces, Williams reveals a personal iconography and expressiveness in line that is both graceful and spontaneous, studied and rhythmic, bold and fragile.

Like his twin impulses of formal abstractionism and more subjective figurative painting, Williams isn't

afraid of potential contradictions or turnabouts; in fact, he smoothly encourages them.

In works like 1985's "Harlem Crescent," one in a series of graphite/acrylic washes on paper, Williams' sense of line is almost luxurious and definitely sensual—free and organic enough to make its point, stylized enough to make it boldly. Likewise, "Hawk's Move," from the same series, works in the same crestlike form of geometric shapes, here energized by looser color and a more frenzied sense of energy, but recognizable for what it shares with the rest of the series: a diamond within a frame surrounded by vinelike twists of line and shape.

Although he can explain these pieces in technical terms, Williams, more graphic poet than mere formalist, is careful not to leave too much of his art to procedure.

"Back in the '60s and '70s, there was a tendency for critics to see my work in the context of formalism and minimalism. But I never really had any interest in formalism; it just didn't allow for a whole emotional range that I've always seen as necessary," he says.

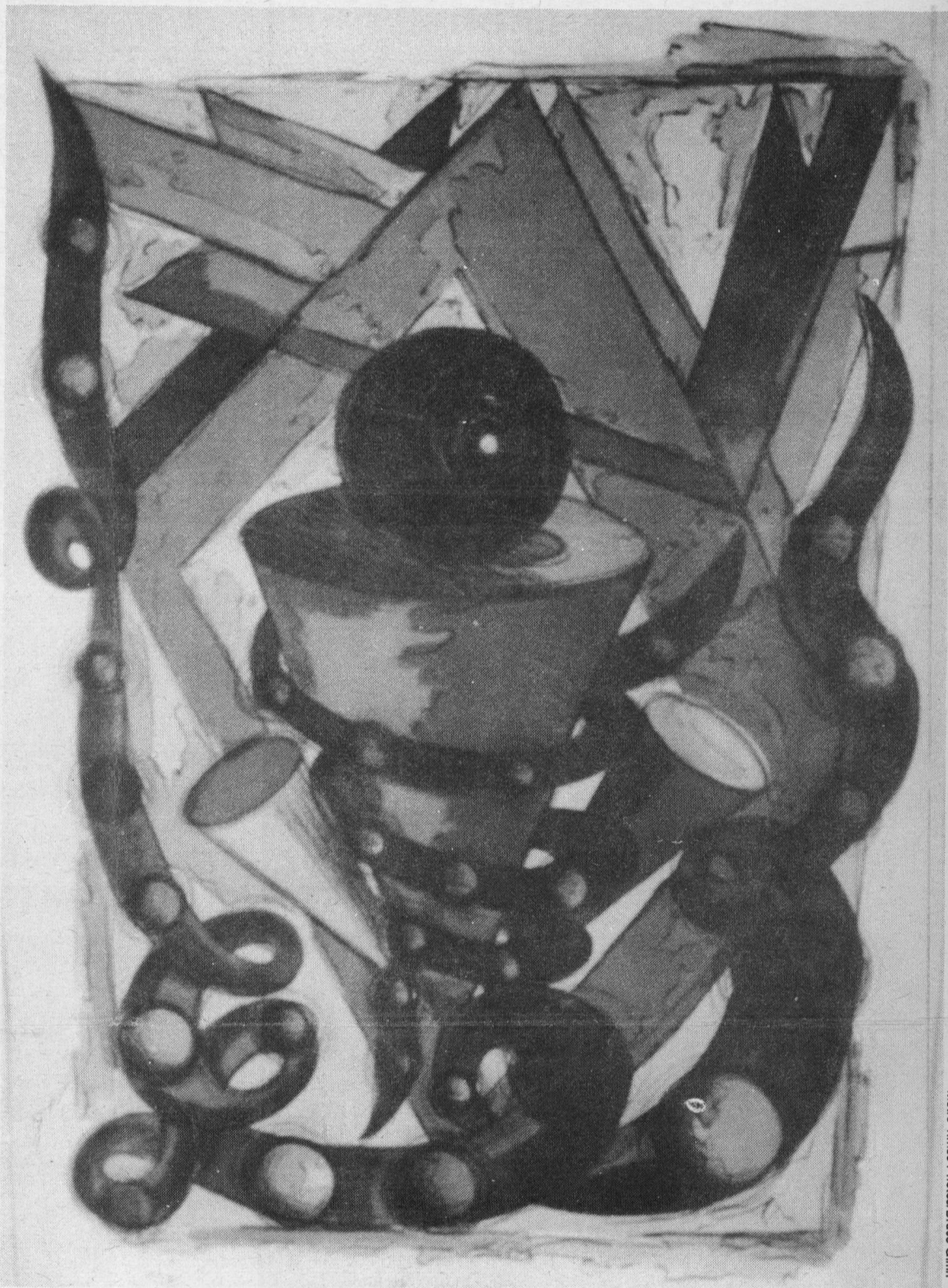
"I see the diamond shape in my pieces as a theme and presence I've been working with for 30 years, as a

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"Caravan" linoleum cut with lithograph, 1991

stabilizing force, a form that interacts compositionally with what's around it. But it goes back to the quilts of my childhood, the patterns and forms I grew up with."

Williams is wary of reducing art to a matter of formula, using his well-disciplined palette of drawing and painting to make his private celebration of art a public thing.

"As an educator, I do have to contend with the procedure of how to make art," he concedes, "but in my work I'm trying to find a language that's very distinct, unto itself, that makes it more than just a process. I see the emotional range left out of formalism very much fueling my work."

Underneath Williams' studied sophistication is real passion. This is especially evident in his sketchbook pieces, added to the show at Washington's prompting. Here, Williams' line is revealed at its freest, with all the intimacy of a modernist's postcard, as much personal as emblematic.

Works like 1986's "Inherited Memory" show a reverence for African art, both in its broad,

simple nobility and its delicate subjectivity, both seen in the graceful meticulousness of his tiny ink line. But it is this marriage of technique and inspiration that is perhaps most obvious in the sketchbook selections that spiritually anchor the show, extending to the furthest boundaries of Williams' canon.

Although his bold "Brown Berries" of 1970 and 1992's "Sunshine At Midnight" are on opposite ends of the Williams spectrum, both stylistically and chronologically, they both boldly assert what he has identified in his work as "a language unto itself."

As with the sketchbook selections, the private act of creativity finds itself translated into both the accessible and the iconic. Both craft and resilience—what he's done and how he's done it—are balanced and compelling.

The masterful handling of space in the busy color interruptions of the masklike "Berries," with its complex topography, is blood brother to the same simple energy of "Sunshine," with its spontaneous rhythm and utterly confident raw

sense of line. Both manage to convince without pandering.

But for the levels of sophistication that Williams' work can be taken to, it is its ability to communicate simply and universally that is the artist's chief concern.

"My art is about my experience, which, by nature, makes it about other people's experience," he says, careful to point out that as an African-American artist reflecting his experience, any alignment of his art to political or race-specific orientation would be problematic. As he puts it, "There isn't a need to be that exclusive. I'm trying to evoke human response. My demographic is the human arena. I hope my work is about celebration, about an affirmation of life in the face of diversity; to reaffirm that we're human, that we're alive, that we can celebrate existence."

Lifeline, indeed, but as always, Williams is a master of understatement; the real art here is in the experience.

Hobey Echlin writes regularly for the Metro Times.