

Looking at *Double Dare*, the viewer finds it hard to believe that William T. Williams once rejected gesture and texture in favor of flat, geometric planes of high-keyed color. But the early artistic milieu in which Williams worked and helped shape—as well as his education and experiences—yields insights into his early style and the works that follow.

Williams, born in North Carolina in 1942, was ten when he and his family moved to New York. He received formal art training at Pratt Institute and at Yale University

(MFA, 1968) during the 1960s. This was the decade that gave rise to Minimalism, a movement that sought to emphasize primary forms by sacrificing the personal gesture of the Abstract Expressionists. Against this backdrop, Williams in his early work focused on the complexity of geometric form and its relationship to color.

By 1971 Williams was already highly respected as a leading exponent of clean, geometric abstraction. That year he received his first one-person show in New York, which proved a success. Williams

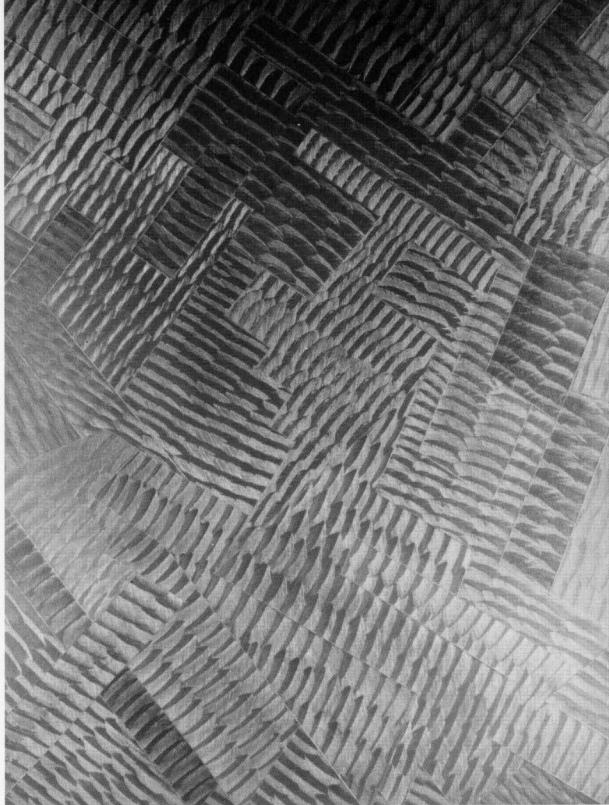
# William T. Williams and

## *Double Dare*

William T. Williams (American, born 1942), *Double Dare*, 1984. Acrylic on canvas, 84 x 54 1/2 in. North Carolina Museum of Art. Purchased with funds from the North Carolina Art Society (Robert F. Phifer Bequest)



continued to earn recognition: He was included in two major exhibitions at the Whitney Museum of American Art (including the 1969 biennial), was featured in *Life* magazine, and was appointed to a Brooklyn College faculty position that he continues to hold today. In spite of this success, Williams reexamined the direction of his work. In an interview with art historian Valerie Mercer, he explained that he didn't "want those kind of refined, seemingly effortless surfaces," which gave "no indication of hand, no effort, no toil on the surface. In the Expressionist tradition, the more apparent the toil, the better. I'm finding more and more that I relate to



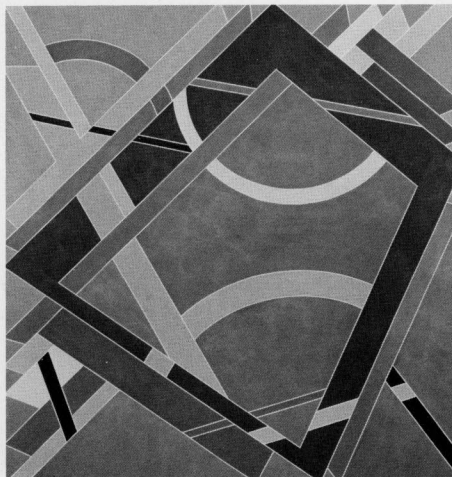
*Equinox* (1975) reflects Williams's rejection of flat, geometric planes of color in favor of a shimmering, nearly monochromatic, tactile surface. Collection of the artist.

what I previously didn't relate to, which was the aspect of gesture. I think that what the work is doing is focusing in on the various artistic means that interest me . . . certainly mark, certainly calligraphy. They're the only vehicles I have for moving the paint around."

With this change in interest, Williams's canvases assumed a raw physical presence. His experiments with color, light, and structure were fueled by memories of his past. Reminiscences of his birthplace in Spring Lake, North Carolina, and his childhood home in Queens, New York, are translated into subtle colors and abstract marks of short, consecutive brush strokes. The artist specifically drew inspiration from the fleeting effects of wind-blown fields and bodies of water. The West African textiles that Williams encountered during trips to Africa also inspired new geometric structures in his paintings.

*Elbert Jackson L.A.M.F., Part II* (1969) reveals Williams's early concerns with geometric painting. Synthetic polymer paint and metallic paint on canvas, 109 7/8 x 115 1/2 in. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Carter Burden, Mr. and Mrs. John R. Jakobson, and purchase.

Since 1971 Williams has worked in series. *Double Dare* belongs to the artist's third series, which he began in the mid-1980s. Composed of a somber palette of black, purple, gray, and earth tones, the painting is split into two distinct sections, the upper closely resembling the loose patterning of the previous series, and the lower built up with layers of paint poured onto the surface and dripped down its length. The painting, however, was not spontaneously executed, but thoughtfully composed. Williams concentrated on the physical



*Savannah* (1979) belongs to a series of paintings in which Williams explores vivid color and encrusted surfaces. This series immediately preceded the series that includes *Double Dare*. Collection of the artist.

substance of paint, creating sensual interactions between artist and material, and between material and viewer.

Among the references to be found in *Double Dare* are personal recollections of his childhood. In a recent interview Williams explained that "*Double Dare* refers to the distance I have traveled as an adult. The souvenirs of endless summers, childhood pranks dared and general mischief." There is a certain playfulness in the syncopated placement of the image of the hand. Beyond the reference to youthful games and attitudes, the imprint of Williams's hand—his most personal gesture, his own "mark"—at once hovers above and sinks into the encrusted surface. Williams literally and metaphorically endows his abstract image with a human touch.

—V.B.





**William T. Williams talks with docents and visitors after his lecture March 20.**

*Editor's note: In the annual docent lecture presented last March, William T. Williams traced the development of his work, beginning with his childhood in North Carolina and concluding with a look at his most recent work. The following edited excerpt focuses on African influences in his work, one of many influences that he discussed in his lecture.*

ment, but also the diversity of the cultures, and the kind of material culture that exists on the African continent. And I emphasize the notion of the African continent because it was paramount in suggesting to me the richness of material that I could use

## William T. Williams Featured Speaker at Annual Docent Lecture

In the sixties I was selected as an American representative to the second world festival of black and African culture that was held in Nigeria. Countries all over the world wherever there were people of African descent sent delegations of creative people—musicians, artists, poets, writers, film makers. It was a who's who not only in terms of the African continent but in terms of artists of African descent from all over the world. And it was a chance to realize not only the diversity of the African conti-

as a resource other than just the nature of European painting that I had been trained in. Certainly the textiles that I saw in Nigeria had a huge influence on me.

I'm going to show you a work of art now that's in the Yoruba exhibition here to give you some juxtaposition of two images so that we can come full circle and see the work in another context. Very often African-American artists, specifically abstract artists, have two problems: finding an audience and finding an audience

### Videos on Art and Artists

The following videos will be shown this July and August in the temporary video screening room. The video selection changes weekly and can be seen any-time during regular Museum hours. Admission is free.

**July 19–24**

*Memories of Monet*

**July 26–31**

*Monet: Legacy of Light*

**August 2–7**

*Masterpieces of the Met*

**August 9–14**

*National Gallery of Art*

**August 16–21**

*The Louvre*

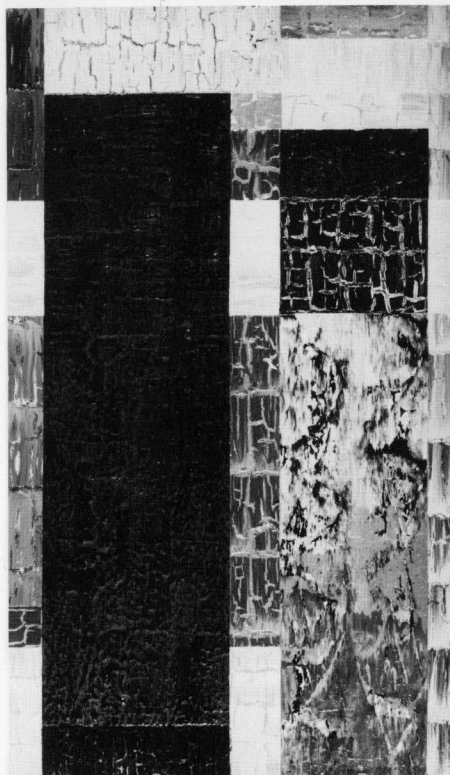
**August 23–28**

*Uffizi: Florence's Treasure House for Art*

**August 30–September 4**

*The Popes and Their Art: The Vatican Collections*

William T. Williams, (American, born 1942), *Carolina Shout*, 1990. Acrylic on canvas, 75 x 44 inches. Private collection



where they see the work not necessarily in the context of just contemporary art, but also in the context of African-American tradition. It's a duality for the African-American artist in terms of the black community; it's a duality for the African-American artist also in terms of the white community. I hope that what you can begin to understand about my work is that it's work that bridges both communities and has embraced both communities—clearly embraced the African-American tradition in works of art.

So I invite you to do two things: Remember these two slides, *Carolina Shout* and the work of art that's to your far left [*Egungun Costume*] as well, because there is a clear tradition in Africa of the involvement of geometry and of a certain kind of movement within geometry. The African costume is meant to be seen in motion, and if you remember the paintings that I did in the early seventies [which emphasized geometry and movement] you can see that I've come full circle in my thinking.

*Williams also discussed the series to which his painting Double Dare, in the Museum's twentieth-century collection, belongs.*

Now the hand prints, which is what everyone wants to know about. I had been involved in illusion for so long in terms of either trying to create one kind of illusion

of surface or another. But one day when I came in the studio, I no longer could find the surface—the two-dimensional plane—in the painting. I inadvertently touched the surface of the painting with paint on my hand. What struck me was that touching the surface reinforced the flatness, the two-dimensionality of the surface. It brought me back to the idea that this was a flat piece of canvas and that this impact of touching forced me to not see this thing as an illusion.

The hand prints also brought narrativeness into the work, and again a kind of autobiographical reference. Touching is probably the first gesture that we have as human beings. Prior to seeing, the sense of touch is there. This idea posed the central question to my own quest as an artist. Is art a matter of skill? Or does art come from some other activity? Certainly in the latter part of the twentieth century one of the things that artists have been asserting is that

*Egungun Costume Textiles*. Eric Robertson African Arts, New York, N.Y.



skill is not a prerequisite for a work of art. And certainly in these paintings, the direct way that I'm putting the paint on calls attention to that issue.

The other reference quickly brought to mind is the notion of healing, the notion that this sense of touch and the painting, and this kind of spiritual nature of the whole process of painting, were becoming one and the same. The removal of the brush or the instrument from making a work of art and allowing the hand to be the direct expression certainly brought me in contact with the work of art in a more direct manner than I had allowed in almost twenty years. And as such, it was a healing process for me.