

# Artist Williams and 'a freer kind of math'

Artist William T. Williams paints in the affirmative. His canvases, large as his love for life and paint, bustle with geometric forms, linear shapes and "hieroglyphics," suspended in a rainbow of acrylics. His manipulation of these paints and abstract shapes creates vibrant textures and colors which touch the viewer on an intuitive level.

Williams' paintings of the past decade, which illustrate a stylistic evolution from hard-edge geometric to fluid organic, are now on exhibit in the University of Wisconsin Memorial Union's Main Gallery. Williams will appear in person to discuss his art at 3 p.m. Sunday, Feb. 3, in the Main Gallery.

Surrounded by a chronology of these works in his Manhattan loft, the 37-year-old black artist explains the development of his style.

"The nature of life tends to be abstract at times and one way to understand that abstraction is to use it as subject matter and a way to affirm life," says Williams.

"These works were influenced by being an urban person, living in an urban situation and spending an enormous amount of time in North Carolina. It's been a battle between loving New York City and loving rural America. Fifteen to 18 years later, there's a resolution in my art in which the geometry is subordinated to the fluid elements."

Williams, who was born and raised on a farm in North Carolina, strives to "make paintings which touch a



William Williams

person's life and for a split second, make them think of things that are not material."

He considers abstraction the universal language and speaks enthusiastically of geometry and math as foundations for his paintings. His earlier works, bold, eye-catching geometric configuration bathed in bright colors, have yielded to what Williams calls "a freer kind of math."

The more recent paintings trade the impeccability of masking tape borders and cleanly defined color areas, for a more natural order. The hieroglyphic or repetitively marked works achieve their forms from strings dragged across a wet canvas or scraping with a palette knife. The less sophisticated method marbleizes the patches of color and produces shaky lines. Williams retains mathematical order, however, by

planting the hieroglyphics in rows just as he did with seeds on the North Carolina farm.

This repetitive marking style, which continues to be part of Williams' methodology, transpired in the early '70s with paintings he did resembling an aerial view of the Sahara Desert. He achieved the relief surface of shimmering ripple-like texture with pearlized paint additives and layer upon layer of acrylic markings.

"As I worked on these, I began to realize that the markings were what I was really getting into. The geometry was becoming less important and the sensation of marking, tracking and moving across a surface is what really began to interest me," he continues.

"The paintings became very religious like chanting, doing the same mark over and over again, repeating it maybe 15,000 to 20,000 times each day. It took eight hours of painting to get one shape," Williams explains. His formal art training includes a degree from Pratt Institute and Yale University. "I began to think of Van Gogh, Seurat and other artists who also systemized the mark."

Following the artistic zen of these great masters has been only part of Williams' achievements. The soft-spoken painter also considers himself one of the greatest colorists in art today. Five summers in Maine, teaching at the Skowhegan School for Art and Design have quieted his bold, beach city colors and given his

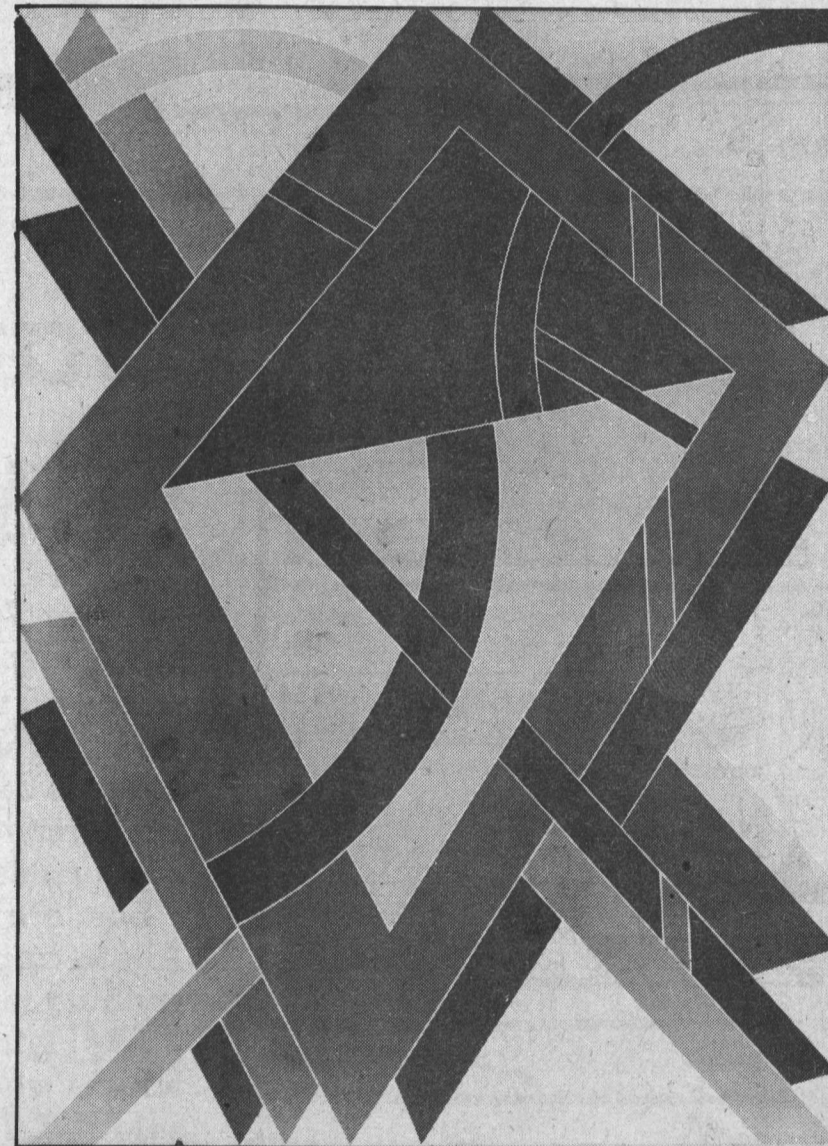
palette a more subtle range of colors. Most of the works executed in Maine Williams considers to have a "softer, more seductive color and a feeling of nature being burnished."

"One of the things I've been trying to do in recent years is find a way in which the color would seem natural, and not look as if it were applied but instead, like a phenomena. You can sense the color; it's almost like light rather than applied pigment." Williams explains how he adds precipitated chalk to the paint to make it look drier and more like pigment in its natural state.

A painter for 15 years, Williams also teaches drawing at Brooklyn College and lectures throughout the country. He feels his profession is one of the few where getting old means getting better. The mellowing of his style corresponds closely with the life experience that permeates both his subject matter and technique.

"Whereas at one time I was concerned with such absolute geometry, now if a line is crooked, if it bends, I begin to accept this as human nuance," says Williams. "That's part of the human experience. Ten years ago everything would have to have had the properness of Brooks Brothers. Now somehow, that has changed radically."

The Williams exhibit, which is part of African-American History month, is sponsored by the Wisconsin Union Directorate Art and Craft area, and will be on exhibit through Feb. 6.



Williams' "Sophia Jackson L.A.M.F." (1969).