

Williams' Harlem Sunday, 1990

Williams Explains Painting From Life

by Franklin Sirmans

Looking into the visionary gaze of William T. Williams, one immediately discerns the nature of his dedication. Williams speaks slowly and assuredly, very similar to the way he paints. He sagaciously discusses discipline and its value.

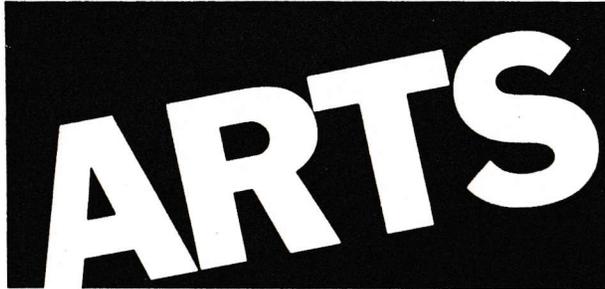
Over the past 20 years, William T. Williams quietly has established a distinctive signature mode in his paintings: He has limited himself to large vertical canvases that seemingly drip paint. What is astounding is the infinite possibility that he brings to each and every canvas. With the use of color and the buildup of paint, he creates patined surfaces that lend character, yet also hide things from the human eye. We are forced to feel through color. In his most recent paintings, the surfaces are thickly encrusted, asserting a raw physicality that he previously had not explored. Selected paintings and drawings are on view at The Studio Museum in Harlem through October.

After completing an M.F.A. program at Yale University in 1968, Williams returned to New York City with letters of recommendation in hand. His first letter brought him to the Park Avenue home of Ethyl Schwartzberger, a sister of a woman in New Haven who had seen his work. Schwartzberger, a 1960s Charlotte Mason (benefactor to Harlem Renaissance literary stars Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston), introduced him to the director of the Guggenheim Museum. After discussing Williams' work, the director promptly offered him a position as a security guard at the museum. Williams was not surprised, nor deterred: "I didn't flinch; I just chalked it up [for what it was]."

And it hasn't changed. Williams' second letter brought him to the home of art patron and scholar Dore Ashton. Ashton introduced Williams to Black artists Charles Alston, Romare Bearden and Richard Mayhew. Through Ashton, Williams secured a job

teaching art at the School of Visual Arts. Around this time, Williams met with initial organizers of The Studio Museum in Harlem, where he proposed what today is known as the Artists-in-Residence Program, where many prominent "African diasporic" artists since have honed their skills.

After a year overseeing this program and basically "doing everything I was not supposed to be doing, hanging shows and taking care of the administrative aspects of the museum," Williams left to further pursue his own artistic agenda. In 1969, he started Smokehouse, a group that painted murals in Harlem. It was that summer that a turning point of sorts occurred when Williams was shown with Mel Edwards, Steve Kelsey and Sam Gilliam, who already had garnered much with their own brand of abstract art.



The show, called "X to the Fourth Power," generated a lot of publicity for the artists, and the museum itself. A review in *The New York Times* illustrated a Williams work and aided in leading to his first gallery show. Reese Palley, of the SoHo-based Reese Palley Gallery, saw the review and immediately sought Williams out. The Museum of Modern Art acquired his painting *Elbert Jackson L. A. M. F., Part II*.

Early in 1970, two of Williams' paintings were exhibited at the Foundation Maeght in the south of France, along with those of abstract expressionism's white giants, Willem de Kooning, Jackson Pollock,

Mark Rothko and Clyfford Still. From that point, a whirlwind of activity — one that eventually had to conclude — surfaced for the mild mannered Williams. He traveled to Europe and then was given a second show at the Palley Gallery. That show sold out and Williams appeared in *Time* and *Life* magazines.

In 1971, Williams also began teaching painting and drawing at Brooklyn College, where he has been ever since. Coinciding with this position, Williams, instinctively and intellectually, as a painter, returned to his birthplace. Born in Cross Creek, N. C., in 1942, he consciously made a move to evoke more of his past personal experiences in his paintings. It began with his Southern upbringing; he was raised among extended family and friends, until the age of 10. Paintings like *Red Fern* and *Savannah* evoke this Afro-Southern experience.

In 1952, the Williams family moved to Far Rockaway, Queens. It was there that Williams began to explore his interest in the arts. He would draw on old postcards and letters. At the local community center, he was given a studio and materials to work. After graduating with honors from the High School of Industrial Arts (now known as the High School of Art and Design) in 1962, Williams attended Queens Community College, where he studied graphic arts. Upon graduating from Queens in 1964, he did a short stint in the graphic arts department at *Billboard* magazine. Dissatisfied with his office position, Williams enrolled at Pratt Institute, in order to return to his true passion, painting. In 1968, his junior year at Pratt, he won a summer scholarship to the prestigious Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, where he met prominent artists including, Al Held, Marisol and Ben Shahn.

Although Williams had been painting in a geometric style, he characterizes himself as "never having been a devotee to formalism. . . . It was probably the influence of quilts and an awareness of

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our textiles tradition," artifacts of Afro-Atlantic art history, that led him to explore hard-edged geometric painting. Yet, after 1971, "more consciously I pushed my experience into my work. ... Formalism [became] secondary to the content; I never wanted to make paintings that were just a fulfillment of theory.

... The experiences that I have as a person are important to me; all of my past is important to me; where I come from is important; every woman who patted my head and encouraged me in church is important to me — my family, my parents, all those people, for all those years, they encouraged me — they never questioned the whole idea of being an artist." One can sense this change in approach, "but I don't overtly try to make Black art. The work speaks

to that without having to have a conscious edge. ... It's a celebration of the Black soul, but it's a human experience, as well."

With the methodical pace of a small Southern town, Williams also set about changing his own frenetic pace within the machinery of the New York arts scene. He distanced himself from the social facets of the art world and continues to do so today. "I come in the studio every day, I work, [and] I rarely go to openings and cocktail parties and that kind of stuff. Basically, I paint, I teach, and spend time with my family." And, it was a sight indeed to see Williams and fellow artists Houston Conwill and Vincent Smith trooping around the recent opening of the "William H. Johnson" retrospective exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art.

Currently, Williams works on a single canvas for up to a year and a half, "building it." The newest works, on exhibit at The Studio Museum in Harlem, are marked by a vibrancy unseen in the earlier paintings. With a palette bursting, bubbling and blowing some deep blues, radiant reds and yellows, characteristic of German expressionism or Spice Islands quiltmaking, *Carolina Shout* and *Harlem Sunday* are two paintings not to be missed.

For aspiring artists, the experienced Williams offers, "You need to take your time. Romy Bearden told this to me, 'Art is an old man's game; it takes years just to understand the instrument like a musician, and to become an instrument yourself so that you can use the instrument.'" Day in and day out, Williams is fine tuning.