

MICHIGAN:

WILLIAM T. WILLIAMS

SHERRY WASHINGTON GALLERY

1274 Library St.

Detroit, 48226, 313/961-4500

William T. Williams is one of few African-American artists included in the most recent edition of H.W. Janson's *History of Art*. However, this exhibition of 29 works on paper, spanning the years 1970 to 1992, strongly places him within a wider consideration of twentieth-century art history, positioning him beyond any racial bound. Williams's works on paper evidence an affiliation to early European abstraction pioneered by such masters as Picasso, Kupka, Balla, the Delaunays, Malevich, and those associated with the Bauhaus.

The exhibition included mainly abstract works executed in graphite, watercolor, and acrylic wash. Subject matter was divided into four categories: studies of flowers, Cubist-style portraits, schematic line drawings that appear as energetic doodles, and geometric color compositions. Williams has stated that he draws extensively prior to painting, and that prior to drawing, he doodles. Like most artists, his drawings provide an accurate picture of his craft. Five acrylic-wash and watercolor works on paper, all dating from 1970, exemplify a master handling, not only of the medium, but of color and geometric forms in space. Jewel-like, these pieces bring to mind

studies of light and color as typified by Balla's "Iridescent Interpenetrations" series. In *Indiana*, an acrylic-wash drawing, the same luminous color not only structures the basic forms of a curve, rectangle, and square into space, but also the expressive potential of line. Williams's use of color, as influenced by early Modernism, reads as radical, and it is significant to note that in his more recent paintings, there is the same use of color first explored in those dating from 20 years earlier.

The autobiographical nature of the doodle drawings is most clear in 1985's *Half Tide*, a depiction of a seed packet attached to a marker stuck in the ground of a garden. An homage to his roots, the seed packet is representative of Williams's grandmother's garden in North Carolina, where he spent childhood summers, as well as a symbol of sustenance. One could compare the development of seedlings to the manner in which Williams moves from an idea that sprouts forth first in drawings, then achieves full fruition in paintings. Yet, despite their fodder for the "serious" undertaking of painting, as complete and finished works Williams's drawings hold up quite well on their own. -Thomas Wojtas