

## Review/Art

## Getting Personal and Cultural in the Abstract

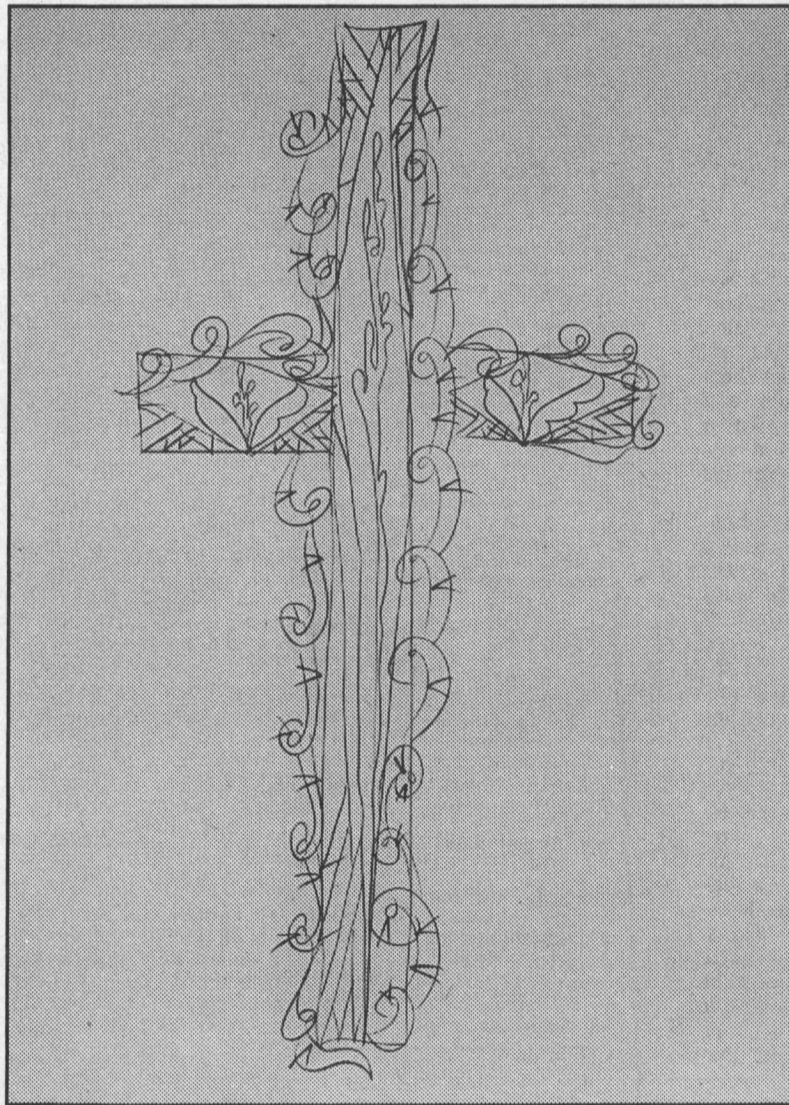
By HOLLAND COTTER

In the right hands, mainstream abstract painting can yield exciting results, as the small, well-selected show of William T. Williams's paintings, drawings and prints at the Studio Museum in Harlem demonstrates. Mr. Williams not only forges a transformative blend from the diverse styles encountered over a 30-year career but also contributes to a phenomenon that has so far eluded clear definition: a black sensibility within painterly abstraction.

The earliest work in the show, "Nu Nile" (1973), finds the artist subtly altering a Minimalist model. The grid format has been broken up into a patchwork of odd geometric shapes tilted on a diagonal. The forms are separated by impasto ridges, making the painting look welded together. A pearlescent medium mixed into the monochromatic gray acrylic lends the surface a metallic sheen. As if to jazz up a simulated high-tech formalism, Mr. Williams marks the surface with a pattern of feathered brush strokes that have a mechanical regularity but catch the light like the ripples in watered silk.

A couple of paintings done just before and after 1980 appear transitional. Here color, still muted, comes into play, and the surfaces have loosened up considerably. "Savannah" (1979), a vertical diptych just over six feet tall, already looks forward to Mr. Williams's later work. In its upper section, the ocher and violet paint, lathered into peaks and troughs, has a certain expressionist turbulence, although one senses that the material itself is intended to be expressive, rather than the imagined gestural impulse behind it. This is made clear in the bottom section, whose surface is fissured like dried earth to evoke the terrain of Mr. Williams's childhood home in rural Georgia.

Similarly personal subjects, along with quotations from the artist's own earlier works, are incorporated in the five impressive paintings from 1989 and 1990 that dominate the current show. They are part of a series titled "11 1/2," a reference to the street address of an aunt and uncle of his who lived in Harlem. In them, Mr. Williams exchanges his earlier overall approach for a rectilinear though painterly geometry, adopts a high contrast palette, and uses painting



The Studio Museum in Harlem

William T. Williams's drawing "Shirley's Goodbye" (1989).

techniques that leave his surfaces looking as heavy and shiny as baked enamel.

"Winter Roses," for example, is made up of several fields, large and small. One of them, painted a dark midnight blue, has a pebbly matte finish. Another has the stirred-up ocher and purple of "Savannah," here overpainted with a pattern of stencil-like floral and curlicue shapes that bring the surface pattern of "Nu Nile" to mind. "Harlem Sunday" seems to be literally constructed of

big, discrete strokes of paint set one beside another like tilework, and the narrow vertical bands that run along the sides of the piece are so thickly and darkly painted as to suggest charred wooden frames. Their surface is cracked and split, letting layers of brilliant red show through like a banked fire.

All these visual motifs come together in "Carolina Shout." A collage of many of Mr. Williams's textural

Painting is pushed into the third dimension of sculpture.

and chromatic effects, it is as bright and eye-catching as an African textile design, but with two dark, seemingly back-lighted columns giving it a quiet totemic presence. "Harlem Sunday" also holds a kind of totem, in the form of a black, vaguely cruciform figural shape. It represents one of the few instances of loose, relaxed brushwork to be found in any of the paintings and provides a point of contact with the work on paper—the organic Surrealism of the "Ellington Series" etchings (1976-1982), for example, and the simple Matisselike drawing of an ornamental cross in "Shirley's Goodbye" (1989)—where a more fluid touch prevails.

In fact, in the context of this show the works on paper are most interesting for revealing how thoroughly deliberated Mr. Williams's paintings are. And it is a special kind of deliberation. Work-intensive and additive, it pushes a traditionally two-dimensional medium into sculpture and embeds specific cultural sources into a painterly mode usually reserved for personal expressivity. Similar iconoclastic preoccupations may be discerned in the diverse work of artists like Al Loving, Jack Whitten and Sam Gilliam, all of them also black abstract painters of the 50-year-old Mr. Williams's generation. To the rarefied air of an older formalism and to the conceptual rigors of more recent abstraction, these artists' willingness to stretch existing models offers a challenge, and it is one solidly stated by Mr. Williams's handsome show.

"William T. Williams: Paintings and Works on Paper" remains at the Studio Museum in Harlem, 144 West 125th Street, through Nov. 15.