

## Archived Article - Adding Emotion to Abstract Art

### Adding Emotion to Abstract Art

The New York Times

By William Zimmer

Abstract painting is widely thought to be in the doldrums these days. Too many competing and splintering "isms" have made many people question the basis of abstraction.

A solution frequently heard is for abstract painter to consciously invest their work with the same kind of emotion and drama that the best figurative painters have employed throughout history. The paintings of William T. Williams from his "111 \_" series, currently at the Montclair Art Museum, point to the success of this attitude.

Mr. Williams is convincing because he has succeeded in integrating a lot of personal content into formal schemes, and the exhibition shows the steady increase of emotion through 14 paintings made from 1973 to 1990.

Mr. Williams is abetted in this show by a perceptive and vivid catalogue essay by Valerie J. Mercer. In addition to a detailed discussion of the formal growth of Mr. Williams's painting, she provides rich clues to the work, like letting the viewer know that 111 \_ refers to the address of a Harlem building where an aunt and uncle of Mr. Williams lived.

The artist was born in Spring Lake, N.C., in 1942 and educated at Pratt Institute and Yale and now teaches at Brooklyn College. He received recognition and commercial success in the early 1970s for paintings based in the Formalist tradition, in which seemingly effortless surface refinement was the goal.

The story at Montclair begins with paintings that brandish their elegance. They are in metallic colors, and tonal pattern of discrete marks runs through them. The paintings are subdivided into irregular but straight-edged sections and the dividing lines between the sections are so pronounced that they flirt with the notion that pieces might be collaged onto the canvas.

The mark making might remind one of furrows in a field, and the divisions are like parcels of land seen from the air. Indeed, Ms. Mercer acknowledges that the landscape of rural North Carolina might be present in these paintings. If so, it is transmuted into something pristine.

Beginning in 1979, Mr. Williams divided his paintings vertically into two equal sections. The burnish is off the color and the colors recall raw earth, especially in the painting "Savannah." A related painting, "Roseville," has the delicate pastel colors of distinctive Roseville pottery.

The painting with the odd title "Batman" is strongly reminiscent of Impressionism. Monet's rows of poplars reflected in water come to mind. The top half of "Batman" has a pattern of repeated tree like shapes. In the bottom half though, these shapes are not distorted as trees are when seen in water; rather, the reddish surface is cracked over all, and cracking is a device Mr. Williams has used to great effect in later work.

"Lagos," from 1983, is formally related to the above works, but has specific, enriching cultural contents. It is dominated by royal purple, a color associated with Africa, and the looser patterning suggests Islamic calligraphy. Lagos, the capital of Nigeria, was a center of Benin bronze culture.

The catalogue essay quotes Mr. Williams as saying that when he made Formalist work he "wanted to make beautiful paintings in terms of a global sense of what classicism means; it's no different from what you see in Persian miniatures or Benin bronze works."

The next work encountered in the exhibition is from 1989, an interval of six years. It shows a deliberate rupture with classical beauty, though Mr. Williams remains a painter of enormous control.

During that time Mr. Williams went back to dividing his canvas, but now all the sections are right-angled, though varying radically in size. Vertical trips are favored motifs, in addition to patchlike sections.

If the radical quality of crazy quilts comes to mind (and "Winter Roses" contains a collage area of filligreed quilt batting), it is a notion strengthened by the great variance in patterning and jarring color combinations. The cracking potential of acrylic paint is exploited, and one color will appear to be oozing from another like sap.

One also thinks of Hans Hoffmann's doctrine of "push and pull," in which painting was to be built of rectangular areas that optically advanced and receded. But Mr. Williams gives this theory new and colorful vigor with paintings called "Carolina Shout" and "Devil's Night à la Blue Samba."

The right half of the recent "Harlem Sunday" is occupied by a large loopy freehand shape that reads as a spectral figure. Mr. Williams is apparently adding a new level of unpredictable content. If abstract painting has to make a case for itself these days, through evidence provided by 14 paintings Mr. Williams puts up a moving and convincing argument.



Roseville, Mott-Warsh Collection, 1982



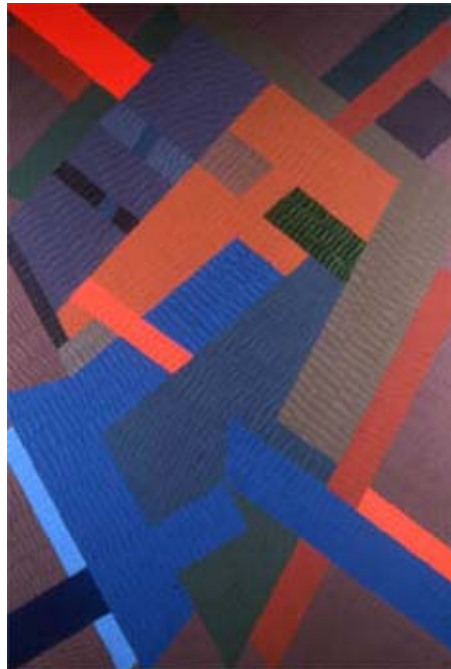
Batman, 1979



Devil's Night Blue Samba, Private Collection, 1989



Harlem Sunday, Private Collection, 1990



Skowhegan I, 1973, Wadsworth Atheneum

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