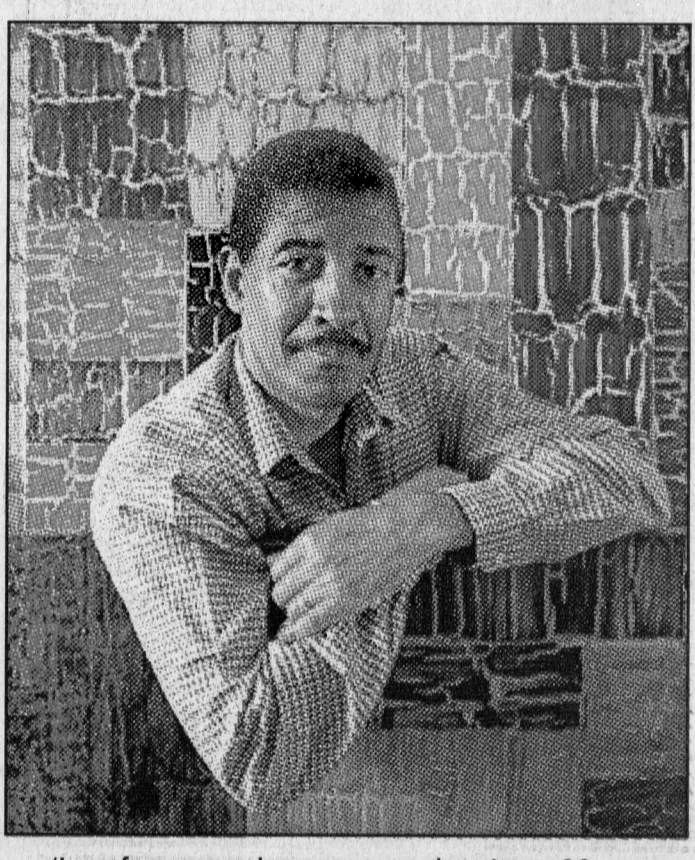

'I am far more adventuresome than I was 20 years ago,' says William T. Williams. 'Now I know it's OK.'

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Improving with age

At 51, William T. Williams is one of America's most respected painters, but the Spring Lake native is little-known in North Carolina.

BY CHUCK TWARDY
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NEW YORK

If you can make it here, you can make it anywhere. Except perhaps North Carolina.

William T. Williams' paintings grace prestigious collections across America. He was the subject of a major solo exhibition last year at the Studio Museum of Harlem. He is cited in the landmark H.W. Janson textbook, "History of Art." But he remains largely unknown in the state of his birth.

His work was not included in any North Carolina public collection until the N.C. Museum of Art bought "Double Dare" (1984) in 1991. Only once has he shown and spoken about his work in North Carolina, at a 1985 exhibition at the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art in Winston-Salem. A retrospective of paintings next spring at the Fayetteville Museum of Art will be his second solo show in North Carolina.

"It's a state that has turned out a lot of creative people," says Williams, figuring that attention focused on one might encourage others. "That's all it's about."

And so Williams has Carolina on his mind. Born July 17, 1942, in Spring Lake, near Fayetteville, he moved to New York City in 1952 with his parents, but he visits a large extended family at least twice a year and North Carolina continues to animate his paintings. So do many factors.

"Anything I have ever seen I am going to use ... because that is the nature of my life. I'm a visual person," says the artist, speaking civilly but assertively in his third-floor SoHo studio.

Williams is trying to make his visitor understand that a painting of patchwork patterns does not refer solely to the quilts made by his family and ancestors. Nigerian strip weaving also may have something to do with it, or Russian Constructivist painting of the early 20th century.

The edge in his voice betrays a trace of tolerance in his polite manner. Clearly he is eager for his home state to hear his story but wary of the process. Critics can't seem to get beyond "black artist," a fact he neither declaims nor disclaims. Acridly, he recalls one critic's suggestion that the shapes in a geometric abstraction represented ghetto fire escapes. He rejects the suggestion that his heritage reasserted itself after years invested in white aesthetic traditions.

"It didn't have to," he said. "It was always there. Culture is who you are. ... My heritage was always very, very intact, very firmly planted in my consciousness."

Educated at Pratt Institute, Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, and Yale University, Williams is a professor of art at Brooklyn College, where he has taught since 1971. He is intensely serious about his craft, and jealous, too. He does not want his work reproduced, because the carefully considered tonal interplay and the richly tactile surfaces of his paintings cannot be reproduced. He does not care to discuss the art world around him, because it does not matter to him. Only the daily discipline of his work in the tidy, artificially lighted studio behind his apartment matters.

He tires of hearing his work reduced to handy references, but he acknowledges that the Spring Lake clay that he and his cousins played with long ago influenced his painting in ways that have "taken me a lot of years to understand."

Success has been easier to fathom: "Certainly growing up

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in a family that was supportive has something to do with it."

Williams' father had passed through New York in mustering out of the service and decided to move his family there. Williams spent time in New York and North Carolina, eventually attending school in the former and summering in the latter. He remembers developing an interest in art about age 13 or 14, which steered him to high school at the School of Industrial Arts (now the High School of Art and Design).

The school's practical program was geared to getting jobs in design. Nonetheless, he learned to draw from plaster casts in the classical tradition, and he spent many hours at the Museum of Modern Art, "an extension of our classroom," a few blocks away from the school.

He took a job as a graphic artist with Billboard Music Week, worked 15 weeks and quit. "I walked in one day and I just couldn't deal with it anymore. On the way home, I saw an ad for Pratt, got off the train and got an application."

At the Pratt Institute, Williams continued his classical training, drawing from live models. But in his junior year he lost interest in the academic tradition. "I discovered the expressionists, the German expressionists. . . . That really freed me."

For a while, partly out of economic necessity, Williams made found-object constructions, but in his first year of graduate school, he says, "I decided painting was what I was going to do."

Yale in the early '70s was a heady place. Williams says the scarcity of minorities made him acutely aware of his race. The School of Art and Architecture was solidly grounded in the traditions of the Bauhaus and European modernism, but it was also a hotbed of social ferment. While absorbing the rigorous analysis and response of formalist criticism, Williams also enjoyed a campus climate of wide-open debate.

The grounding in modernist theory and criticism that Williams gained from such teachers as Jack Tworkov and Al Held (a mentor known for his geometric abstractions) "made me come to terms with the contemporary dialogue about painting."

And for several years he proved it. He earned early repute with canvases of rigidly composed, geometric designs "in which seemingly effortless surface refinement was the goal," as critic William Zimmer observed. His first solo show, in 1971 at Reese Palley Gallery, sold out.

Despite his success, Williams yearned to paint in ways that expressed his experience of life and society, and visits to Spring Lake and to Redfern, the Queens housing project where his family lived in the '50s, helped in the transition. In the mid-'70s, he turned out canvases with satiny, patterned surfaces of furrowed ridges.

No one was interested. "In 1972, curators wouldn't look at paintings with tactile surface," Williams recalls. "They had been so accustomed to flat surface."

A mid-'70s visit to Nigeria, his first visit to Africa, provoked further changes, including a tendency for "sun-drenched" color and increased tactility. The paintings of his next series were split into distinct but tone-related top and bottom halves whose deep layers were scored by expressive, V-like patterns.

In the early and mid-1980s, Williams' mark-making took a looser turn, with paint layered onto the canvas less rhythmically, and with the imprint of his hand scattered about the surface. These were the most recent paintings seen in the 1985 SECCA show.

As the 1980s drew to a close, Williams launched a new series of paintings inspired by memories of a Harlem "railroad" apartment where an aunt and uncle lived. The deep blue common to these works recalled a quality of light in the long hallway. These paintings were structured in right-angle sections of varying sizes, the densely impastoed acrylic paint aswirl with earlier-applied and still-wet colors, cracks in the surface revealing layers below.

A fiery elegance marks these paintings, which culminate years of exploration in color, and in refining the idea of modernist painting to include evidence of the artist's handiwork and history.

This refinement helped make him the first African-American artist represented in "History of Art." Anthony Janson, former chief curator at the N.C. Museum of Art and editor of the recent editions of his father's textbook, said he wanted to include an African-American artist, and selected Williams mostly as a representative of "the second generation of Abstract Expressionists that came to age in the 1960s."

"I think Bill is the best of the lot," said Janson, who lives in Raleigh. "He would have made it on his own terms."

Although Williams senses a return to the expressionism that moved him as a student, his current work is infused with experience and wisdom he could not have mastered then.

"The issues I'm facing at 50 are not the issues I faced at 20," he said. "I am far more adventuresome than I was 20 years ago. Now I know it's OK."

Williams recalls the advice Jacob Lawrence, then and now the dean of African-American artists, gave him years ago: "Take your time, that art is an old man's game. The activity of art is so much about experience. I hope if I live to be 70, I hope to be a better painter than I was at 50."