

A 'Laying on of Hands' Makes Complex Images

By Genie Carr
Staff Reporter

One day about six years ago, William T. Williams was working on one of his large, thickly painted canvases when he realized that he had made the illusion so thorough that he had lost his sense of the picture plane. He put up his right hand, which was covered with the paint he had been using, and laid it on the wet canvas.

He found the surface of the picture; and in the imprint of his hand on the painting he discovered an image that brought together many elements of the art he had been making for 10 years: work on color and texture, an immediate contrast of the commonplace and the complex and, not least, a "laying on of hands" that symbolizes both physicality and spirituality.

Several of the "hand" canvases are included in a show of Williams' work at the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art. He talked about them one afternoon last week in SECCA's Main Gallery, where he also gave a lecture about his art Wednesday night.

Quiet-spoken, intense and serious, Williams looks 10 years younger than the 43 years old he will be on July 17. His life and art are an amalgam of the urban — New York City, where he lives and where he received most of his formal art education — and the rural — southeastern North Carolina, where his family ties are.

He was born near Fayetteville, and after World War II he moved with his parents to New York. "But I spent four months a year in North Carolina until I was 15," he said. "That was a traditional thing, to send children back to home, to roots, to the extended family situation. Coming back was important — a revival of nature, and coming back to relatives."

Both implicitly and explicitly, his family nurtured his life as an artist. "My parents provided the materials and the environment to do it," he said. He recalled that his early drawings were on the backs of greeting cards. "I still do that. I have a fondness for those memories," he said.

Williams studied at the City University of New York, the Skowhegan (Maine) School of Painting and Sculpture, the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn and Yale University's School of Art and Architecture.

In the early 1970s, he said, he was doing monochromatic paintings — and doing rather well. "In 1972, I had an exhibition that had been extremely successful. But I walked in the studio and decided I was not going to do any more of the paintings.

"I decided that art was enjoyable and a means of communication that was clear and succinct to me, and I wanted to return to that," he said.

He wanted his art to be a "cultural icon" representing a life of experiences uniquely his: his formal art education and his sense of tradition, including his heritage as a black person and artist.

He said the filling of his canvases with paint from edge to edge also represents the 20th-century icon of photography, both still pictures and television. The modern spectator is accustomed to the fully presented image that fills the frame and offers depths and multiple images.

He feels that his paintings with the hands offer those elements, too. When he first made the image, he said, he thought it was "the corniest thing in the world. It was what kids do." But then, he said, he realized that the image is both commonplace and complex: "The use of the hand in a cave painting and it implies one thing; the use of it on a stop sign implies something else; the use of it in religious iconography implies something else."

In his painting, he said, the hand image, is in a fixed place, but it "gives a sensation of moving upwards; yet gravity is pulling the paint down." He piles hand imprint upon hand imprint, in different colors and thicknesses. The color placement of the hands and lines of paint flowing from them become a matter of orchestration, he said.



Staff Photo by To

William T. Williams with one of his works

Williams paints in a studio that is half of a loft in lower Manhattan; he and his family live in the other half. He said he goes into the studio at about 9 in the morning and works — painting, stretching canvases, drawing or reading — until about 4:30. He returns from 8 until midnight.

He doesn't attend many openings or otherwise participate much in the New York art scene, he said. Despite that, he has seen success in New York; the Museum of Modern Art and other major institutions include his work in their collections.

Ironically, that success produces

some frustration in him: North Carolina, he said, has taken virtually no notice of him although his roots are here.

"This is my first exhibition here," he said, looking around the SECCA gallery. "It's ironic that I'm not represented in any museums in North Carolina. This is the first gesture of support for me in the state of North Carolina."

"I would like to do a public work of art for North Carolina," he added. "Recognition is important because of my long-standing involvement in the state."