

REGEN PROJECTS

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Sue Williams

303 GALLERY

Although the title of Sue Williams's most recent show, "WTC, WWII, Couch Size," suggested a two-to-one ratio of global horror to interior decoration, what came to the fore was pure painting of such boisterous energy that it holds the blandness of bourgeois home furnishing at bay even as it sublimates sociopolitical anxiety. It does so by dint of the sheer nerve with which that anxiety is apotropaically invoked—not so much whistling past the graveyard as striking up a whole brass band against death. In a way, this is not terribly different from what Williams was doing in the work with which she burst onto the scene twenty-five years ago, what Nancy Spero recognized as "violent, cartoonish, explicit, voracious" delineations of the sadomasochism of everyday life. Williams took some heat in those days for her supposed promotion of a cult of victimhood, but how many of her critics noticed the gusto with which she scrawled and hacked her way through the grim truths of experience, the triumphant pleasure with which she flung the evidence down on canvas? No miserabilist, she used to claim to be surprised when people spoke of the "negativity" of her work: "I had always thought it was kind of happy."

Since then, her art has taken more than one unexpected twist; her ventures into abstraction have dismayed some of her admirers as much as Philip Guston's turn to figuration upset his old cronies decades earlier. In recent years, more pointed subject matter has cropped up in her work again, but the old personal-as-political themes of gender politics seem to be less on her mind these days than the geopolitical threats we all face—and for which we may all, in some more or less obscure way, have some responsibility. The subject matter isn't pictorially explicit, as it was in the old days; only some of the titles, whether specific (*Philip Zelikow, Historian* [all works 2013] is named after a conservative ideologue who helped draft the Bush II administration's doctrine of "pre-emptive war" but also unsuccessfully opposed "America's descent into torture") or general (*Ministry of Hate*) give clues as to the works' intended meaning.

It may seem questionable to use the titles of what are otherwise essentially abstract paintings to evoke such weighty and troubling matters, but I don't think the artist slapped them on as an afterthought. If there's comfort in consistency, it's good to see that Williams is just as "happy" as ever. For all the verve and effervescence with which the six works that were on view here were painted, they have distinctly unsettling overtones. And the "darker palette" that one critic has counseled as a way to give the paintings a more portentous gravitas is hardly necessary. Williams's harshly bright, transparent colors can turn on a dime from

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Sue Williams, *Philip Zelikow, Historian*, 2013, oil and acrylic on canvas, 6' 2" x 11' 2".

sweet to grating, and the writhing, twisted forms they describe, the viscous puddings of color and skeins of swirling, wiry lines that look as if they could strangle you, suggest readily enough a world in disarray. That she paints her way through the pictorial carnage with a virtuosity few others could hope to match certainly lends a sense of almost disconcerting jubilation to the proceedings, and it's this weird joyousness amid annihilation that keeps the admittedly unsubtle irony in play in a title such as *Retire in Fla.*, or rather, in the relation between the title and the knock-about energy of a sort of neo-action painting that seems to have taken its idea of splatter less from Jackson Pollock than from George Romero.

—Barry Schwabsky