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Sue Williams' In-Your-Face Art

Plastic vomit centerpiece of S.F. show

BY KENNETH BAKER
CHRONICLE ART CRITIC

SUE WILLIAMS was one of the most noticed participants in the 1993 biennial exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art, and to obtrude in that show's din of overstatement was not easy.

The centerpiece of New Yorker Williams' Whitney ensemble is also the vortex of her current show at the San Francisco Art Institute, 800 Chestnut Street (through August 14): a large puddle of plastic vomit.

This unseemly object provides a truthful foretaste of Williams' temperament: confrontational, vulgar, slapstick and enraged to a point where moral revulsion takes physical expression.

The target of Williams' anger is all that passes for normal life, including niceties of art, so-called normalcy in her view being a masquerade for the oppression of women by men (and to a lesser extent by women as well). The charade is so successful, she implies, the victims so conditioned by physical and economic intimidation to accept their lot, that only shock tactics will unmask the way things really are.

Though she insists her work is more than autobiographical, Williams admits to bringing to it bitter memories of violent, oppressive relationships with family and lovers. (One abusive lover nearly killed her with a gunshot.)

Long bouts of therapy restored her confidence enough to pick up painting again, which she had left after graduating from the California Institute of the Arts in Valencia in the late '70s. Dismissive viewers of her work may write off what she makes now as a protraction of therapy, but there is more to it than that.

TAKING locker-room language and graffiti into her own hands, Williams taps undercurrents of hostility, fear and guilt running between the sexes that are out of sight (but never out of mind, she would say) in polite company. Although her paintings and other objects are unremittingly aggressive, they are not as simple as their stridency suggests.

Williams' vomit sculpture, for example, is first a badge of bulimia, the binge-and-purge eating disorder typically rooted in tyrannized childhood, but mirroring unfulfillable (yet culturally assimilated) male expectations of women.

Secondly, we might see Williams' piece as an unapologetically gross satire of the expressionist theory, which holds that authenticity in art springs from unthought spasms of sensibility, of which Jackson Pollock's drip painting is exemplary. (Pollock was exemplary too in his misogyny.)

Further, Williams' vomit blob luridly dumps content back into the massing of mute, unworked material as sufficient sculpture that began in the 1960s with artists such as Robert Morris and Robert Smithson and continues, in a somewhat different spirit, in that of Wolfgang Laib and Richard Long.

AND as a joke-shop monstrosity, Williams' piece also falls into a line of representation-laden ready-mades that descends (half a century after Papa Duchamp) from Andy Warhol to Haim Steinbach and Mike Kelley. Whether you regard it as art or not, Williams' upchuck pancake is fair warning that anything she does is liable to strike you (and maybe her, too) like a finger down the throat.

I admire the illiberal address of Williams' work. The rawness of her imagery and inscriptions has few parallels in art. (Sue Coe's pictorial diatribes against corporate greed and the anti-war prints of Otto Dix come to mind.)

Williams insists unrelentingly that women's experience of life is different from men's because to men violence — the option of physical domination — always is available.

In hammering this point home, she makes ironic use of phrases she has heard (or uttered) in response to male tyranny, as in "Try to Be More Accommodating." This title turns sickly funny when she scrawls it, like a reminder to herself, beneath an image of a woman's head, its every orifice being penetrated by a hand-held erection.

Images of men come in for plenty of abuse, too, as in the large canvas "That's a Load of . . ." (1992). "A lot of men think they know what it's like to have a baby but that's a load of shit," runs the major inscription, and Williams has cooked up an image to illustrate it. Here a hairy, plaintive man lies naked, spreadeagled on an operating table, attended by contemptuous physicians. What emerges from the laboring patient, caught on a spatula by a female attendant, is no baby.

At the top of the picture a smaller image shows a man emerging from a bathroom door, the word "flush" emanating behind him. "The descion [sic] is never easy," Williams comments, "but at least he has the choice."

In one of her tamer pieces, "It's a New Era" (1993), Williams

WILLIAMS: *Page 46*

WILLIAMS

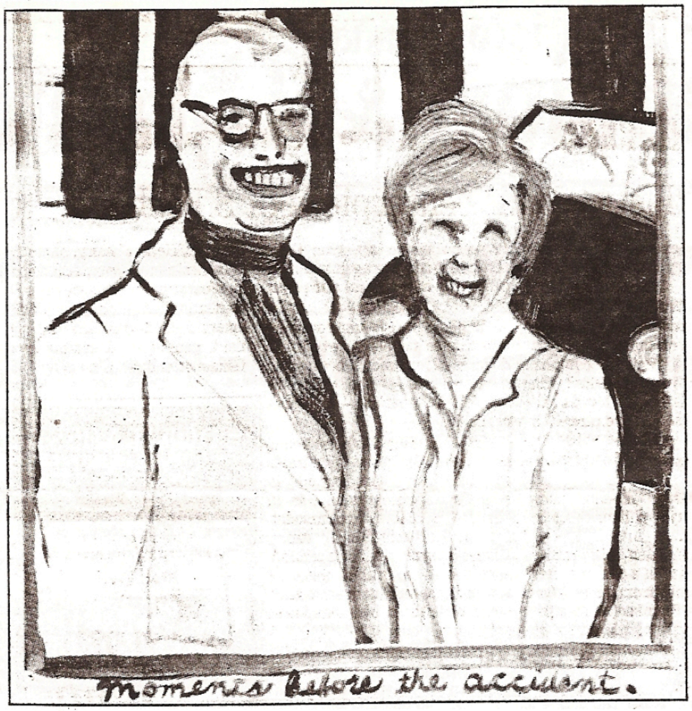
From Page 45

sounds the alarm: "Help! Our President is a man and can be undermined at any moment by a young and busty, hot home-wrecker spy." In the same painting, a voice snickers, "If you're a middle-class housewife, you may be a joke . . . especially to hubby."

No one is spared Williams' vitriol. Feminists, for example, take a beating in "After the Revolution," where she notes that "sisterhood is powerful over sisterhood" and a giantess resembling Gertrude Stein says, "Like mom, we offer warmth, support, discipline and fear."

A small graphic work titled "Choices" ridicules feminists who congratulate themselves on having won new choices for women. To Williams, the options look bleak as ever: "Raise a family and blow dick or live alone like a dog."

Not even the New York art world is exempt from Williams' spleen, despite having swept her up lately in improbable commercial and critical success. "The Art World Can Suck My Proverbial Dick" Williams scrawls in a painting whose imagery accordingly takes a blackjack to New York life and cultural pretensions.


moments before the accident.

Sue Williams' 'Moments Before the Accident,' 1991 (detail)

Describing all this makes me feel that if Williams did not exist, Tama Janowitz would have to invent her. Yet there is an air of sociological destiny about Williams' work not exuded by the related activity of women contemporaries such as Karen Finley, Kiki Smith, Lutz Bacher or Jana Sterback. Perhaps the reason is that we need someone to be as flagrant as she is in burning away the politesse that keeps us from facing who's on top and why.

Taking locker-room language into her own hands, Williams taps undercurrents of hostility, fear and guilt between the sexes

People who saw Richard Prince's show at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art this spring will recognize an affinity between his use of appropriated magazine cartoons and Williams' hand-drawn black-and-white images.

The most temperate piece on view, a parody of a mom and pop snapshot, titled "Moments Before the Accident," indicates another source of Williams' artless drawing style: the work of Ida Applebroog, shown recently in San Francisco at Gallery Paule Anglim. (Despite its apparent quiescence, "Moments Before the Accident" has the force of a homicidal incantation.)

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Williams is bawdy, fearless and merciless. That she may be right about the world and that she can make me laugh in spite of myself, I can accept.

What I hate about Williams' work is that painting in her view appears as tainted as the rest of the camouflage in the sex war, and she evidently feels compelled to destroy it from within.

There are still reasons to paint — or there may be — but obsession with injustice happens not to be one of them. Real painting now is an act of faith (which is why it so often looks absurd). Williams' work is as faithless as art gets. ■