

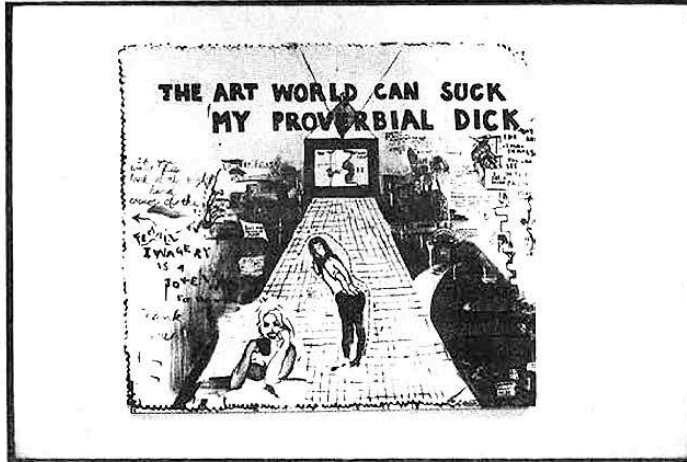
REGEN PROJECTS

Rugoff, Ralph. "It's a Bash." *LA Weekly* (December 1992)

LA WEEKLY

It's a Bash

Sue Williams uses bad-boy art for women's revenge



Shambolism.
grrrrr style

BY RALPH RUGOFF

WHEN STORIES ABOUT SEXUAL HARASSMENT and violence surface into public discussion, we cautiously package and abstract them to spare ourselves the full horror. Sue Williams aims to give that horror its due. In the last few years, this New York-based artist has created disturbing and brutally funny work that confronts psychological and physical violence against women. Williams' cartoony art — paintings with text, mixed-media collages and sculpture — is crude and assaultive enough to risk alienating much of her potential audience. Williams doesn't pull punches: In her bleak moral landscape, there are no role models in sight and the only antidote is biting black humor.

Her current show at the Stuart Regen Gallery offers a hardcore inventory of damage. Amid free-floating images of animalized women, pornographic clowns, vomiting bulimics, forced blowjobs, ballooning rear ends and caricatured sex organs, her sculptures and large canvases present a recurring motif of domestic violence — specifically, men pummeling women. A sculpture of a male fist hitting a woman's face bears the caption "The Union of Man and Woman." Painted over a back wall covered with floral wallpaper (a material traditionally used to conceal ugliness), a scrawled sampler reads: "A Dainty Home for Two — Please Don't Beat Fuck Out of Me."

In portraying the violence hidden under idealized images, Williams avoids the smug authority of the righteous; instead, she speaks from the more ambiguous position of someone drawing on firsthand observation — a position that allows her to mix anger with wit. Shambolic paintings loosely cluttered with images and texts satirize everything from the hypocrisies of the male-dominated art world to the foibles of co-dependency. "The Art World Can Suck My Proverbial Dick," one banner of text declares with defiance and humor, while a nearby image bubble shows an open male mouth gagging in the face of a tiny penis tied and suspended by a ribbon.

Much of Williams' imagery is schematic and appears hastily drawn, if not deliberately clumsy. On one level, this aesthetic of crudity serves to foreground Williams' conceptual and docu-

mentary content, but it plays another important function as well. Though her scrambled compositions recall Mike Kelley's drawings from the mid-'80s, her strategy more closely resembles that of writer Kathy Acker. Just as Acker declines to write about violence in a classical language that would disguise its ugliness, Williams employs a tangled and truncated visual grammar to register not only the fact of violence against women, but also its effects. Images of female degradation that are "neutralized" as "art" in work by her male contemporaries — painters like David Salle and Eric Fischl — are here reconnected to an experience of pain.

By carving out a space for herself making work about men demeaning women, Williams reverses a standard art-world practice. Her appropriation of the raunchy, underground-comics-influenced style of "bad boy" art is likewise more than an exercise in gender-bending; in this show, a number of pieces specifically question our ideas of "masculine" and "feminine" pictorial conventions. "Female imagery is a joke," reads a line on one canvas, and as if in response, a work on paper elsewhere in the gallery features a drawing of a horse — traditionally an apt subject for women artists (and, notably, a trademark of Susan Rothenberg). But this well-endowed horse is squirting urine on a bale of hay while a small tornado blows out its ass, and a caption snarls: "Drawn wrong? Well, I am so sorry!"

Unapologetically "dysfunctional," Williams spurs the easy coherence of much theory-heavy "critical" art, and instead invites viewers to identify with the artist as someone who's no more in control of her cultural position than they are. Yet as intimate as it first appears (her fractured, doodlelike compositions can seem like pages ripped out of a diary), this work is ultimately built around clichés. Williams' illustrated men and women have a generic, '50s cast and are portrayed in conventionalized roles of oppressor and victim. Rather than characters in a melodrama, they function as figures in a diagram, vectors charting ways in which violence against women is entrenched in our cultural life.

Rambling over a varied social field that ranges from Santa Claus to the world of hunting, Williams' clichés repeatedly return us to a single proposition: power wielded by males in this society is largely based on humiliating and debasing women. This is most baldly, and hauntingly,

realized in *Manly Footwear*, a series of six silicon casts of a woman's face that have been progressively battered until the last is unrecognizable.

WHEN ALMOST EVERY BOOKSTORE IS filled with self-help titles like *Women Who Love Too Much* and manifestoes on "co-dependency," the question of culpability is a loaded one. Refusing to monumentalize women as victims, Williams entertains the prickly question: To what extent is the experience of every victim also that of a collaborator? In *The New Santa*, she shows us an "old unemployed elf" jerking off on the backside of a woman whose breasts, nipples erect, are spun around toward him as if pulled by a magnetic force. "My breasts are humiliating me," the text reads, and goes on to wonder why she isn't attracted to more "appropriate" males. An example floats farther down the page: a clean-cut "younger, less-co-dependent Santa."

Williams' concern with linking the personal and the social leads her to take issue with notions like co-dependency ("Let's take a look at that 'co-de-pen-ent,'" concludes one painting) and to challenge accepted definitions of aesthetics as well. "This is (art), not social commentary," another work insists, even as it prompts us to mistrust the idea that these are mutually exclusive terms.

At times, Williams appears mired in static definitions of her own; she seems to rigidly equate decoration with concealment and repression, for example ("If you want filler, look at the right-hand corner of the canvas" quips one painting, steering the viewer to a decorative border). But in portraying everyday scenes, her work reflects complexities and ambiguities missing from boorishly "correct" viewpoints. Williams never condescends to her audience; she engages us first and foremost as social creatures. While the women she depicts usually appear as passive victims, the artist's own voice is an ag-

A R T

gressive one. Her art plunges us into a compulsive excavation and reworking of materials repressed at both personal and societal levels, forcing viewers to connect — in a visceral way — with things they'd probably rather not confront so literally.

Compared to the full-bore catharsis Karen Finley aims for, Williams' work moves us toward something less clearly defined. Without ever being didactic, she asks us to look at uncomfortable truths in a language that preserves their ugliness, calling on us as witnesses of injustice, but also as fellow travelers mired in the same nightmare — whether as persecuted women or as men who persecute women as well as their own feminine sides. As an artist, Williams isn't interested in the exorcism of compiling an inventory and making public confession. She doesn't profess false optimism, nor is her pessimism a pretense. If anything, her art seems to signal the need, under the circumstances, to acknowledge a certain amount of despair as our constant companion — to accept it as the price of recuperating our capacity to remember, and to hold humor as something intimate with suffering, not redeeming it, but making it possible to consider images of horror without becoming numb from either dread or righteous indignation.

The picture is extreme, but Sue Williams is dead on target. **A**

FOR ADDITIONAL
ART LISTINGS,
SEE THE
CALENDAR
ART SECTION
ON PAGE 134.

SUE WILLIAMS
At the STUART REGEN
GALLERY
619 N. Vermont Drive,
West Hollywood
Through December 15