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Vitorelli, Rita and Sue Williams. "A Letter from Sue Williams." Spike Art Quarterly (Summer 2005)



A Letter from Sue Williams

Mit derb-sexuellen Darstellungen in karikaturhaftem Stil, welche die Gewalt an Frauen offen thematisierten, wurde die Amerikanerin *Sue Williams* Anfang der 90er Jahre zu einer zentralen Gestalt des feministischen Kunstdiskurses. Dann überraschte sie mit abstrakter Malerei in der Tradition der Post Painterly Abstraction, um schließlich zu großformatigen, tapetenartigen Bildern zu gelangen, in denen sich pornografische Comic-Elemente in abstrakte Muster verwandeln.

Im Mai führte *Rita Vitorelli* mit *Sue Williams* eine E-Mail-Korrespondenz.

Employing a grossly exaggerated, sexually explicit drawing style bordering on caricature while bluntly and depicting the violence perpetrated against women, American artist *Sue Williams* in the early nineties evolved into a central figure of feminist art discourse. Then she turned to surprisingly abstract painting in the tradition of Post-painterly Abstraction, which finally led to her large scale, wallpaper-like images in which she transformed pornographic comic-strip elements into abstract patterns.

In May *Rita Vitorelli* had the following e-mail correspondence with *Sue Williams*.

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Dear Sue Williams,

I'm very happy that you agreed on doing this interview. I think you should know that I'm an artist, not a critic. For me this is the beginning of a conversation, so please feel free to tell me about anything you don't want to talk about or quite the opposite, something I didn't ask you. Of course, this is just the first draft and lacks the immediacy of a face to face interview. I'm curious about the things to happen!

Tell me something about your youth in the America of the 60s and 70s.

How was it like to study at Cal Arts in the 70s? What were your experiences, interests, your likes and dislikes and influences?

Did you take any interest in feminist issues or critique? Did you join any feminist art programmes? Why did you move to New York City? For me, your work has a west coast flavour.

What were the working conditions in NY like? I'd like to know something about your daily routine as a young and unknown artist. Where did you live, where did you work, where did you hang out ...? NY in the 80s, what was it like? Where did one go? Which scene did you belong to? Important music, literature, theory?

What topics did you discuss with your friends? Which artists were important for you then?

Did you know any European painters prominent in the 80s (Kiefer, Richter, Neue Wilde, etc.) and did they have any impact on the New York art scene?

Painting then seemed to be very male dominated. Female artists like Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger, Cindy Sherman and others worked in different media. Why did you decide to use traditional forms like drawing and painting?

Who were your closest peers at that time?

How closely connected were your private life, your relationships and your work?

I've read that you felt liberated after seeing a Mike Kelley show at Metro Pictures. In what respect?

How did your first shows in NY work out?

It was not until the early nineties that you gained widespread attention. That was comparatively late, you had been working for about ten years or so by then. What do you think was the reason for it?

Your work dealt with difficult issues and had a feminist approach. It was about sexually abused women and male aggression, your own experiences – you yourself were once a battered and abused woman – and those of other women. Everyday realities were rendered in a kind of exaggerated cartoon-like style. In hindsight, these were the perfect issues to make you a (post)feminist icon of the 90s.

Did you have the feeling that the critics made demands on you?

Labels like “confessional art”, “victim art”, “bad girl” are constantly attached to your early work. And it is partially because you have always felt the need to display “the pain” of your personal life. It is important to know about the artist's life and experiences. How did you feel about it?

Your early works: Your cartoon-like style, are there any influential artists? Jim Nutt or Peter Saul come to my mind.

Did you work with source materials or did you work from your imagination?

Your early black and white drawings are very provocative. But since the mid 90s you kind of prettify your subject matter with a certain colouring and an all-over “composition“. You use bright pinks, oranges, greens, yellows. So you can't avoid a certain decorative effect. Why did you decide to do this?

You get quite a crowded canvas, but everything - penises and other organs, shoes, etc. – is so fragmented that any narrative interpretation is denied. It is a pattern. What is the relation between narration and abstraction?

It came as a great surprise to many that your work got more and more abstract and calligraphic. Did you loose your feminist fervour?

Or was it a response to certain expectations by the art world regarding you and your work? Maybe it was an act of resistance?

I've always read about your supposedly linear development towards abstraction. But I don't think that's the reality of an artist. Often artists have very different reasons than what critics think, often quite natural, banal ones. You simply get bored with something and then you move on or so... How do you feel about it?

Some critics (eg. Barry Schwabsky) speak about a “new freedom” in your more recent work. But doing away with content does not necessarily mean liberation. But one quickly faces other constraints, purely for-

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mal ones. What's your experience?

Do you agree with what the critics wrote about you and your work for the last 15 years? Are there many misapprehensions? Is there anything you would like to elucidate?

How did your working conditions change after your first successes?

Let's talk about your daily practice. Do you work every day? Are you more productive when you work for an upcoming exhibition?

What does your studio look like?

Do you work fast or slow?

Your lines seem to be drawn very slowly and are well controlled – not very spontaneous. But at the same time somnambulistic ...

When do you decide on your titles? While painting, using free association, after finishing or to push the work in a certain direction?

I've read that you erase a lot, but there seem to be no visible traces of that process. How do you do it?

How much do you control the drips and splashes? Nothing looks accidentally.

Why do you use only bright, translucent, candy pop-colours in your paintings? Never graduated colours or grey, brown or black.

By avoiding black, you move away from Pollock. Pollock and also De Kooning simply come to my mind. I know that you have been asked about them often ...

All the Abstract Expressionists have their roots in Surrealism. In a way your work reanimates this repressed ancestry (like the work of Mike Kelley, for example). Do you agree?

Do you feel part of a particular tradition in painting?

Do you like Matisse or Picasso?

What's interesting about the art scene in NY today?

If you had one wish for free, what would it be?

All the very best,

Rita Vitorelli

Hello.

These are very good questions and deserve long and thoughtful answers. However, that won't be happening as I am doing it at the last minute.

Since you were wondering about my daily painting practice, I have been painting constantly for the past 9 days—I drop off Charlotte, my 10 year old daughter, at school at 8:00 a.m., then go to the studio. I bring lunch and dinner and I make a lot of coffee. I come home at anywhere from 11:00 p.m. to 3:30 a.m. This is because I wanted to finish my new painting for Basle.

I once painted for 36 hours straight. My paintings got really strange. I came up with the best and weirdest feet I ever painted. Also one night at about 4:00 a.m., I was painting and standing on top of a plastic milk crate with a crack in it. It broke and my leg got stuck, like in a bear trap. I had to crawl around on the floor whimpering and looking for the carpet cutter. Painting is dangerous.

I digress a lot—

So anyhow, I love to paint and smell turpentine. Oils of course, acrylic is repulsive—except that I use it on the background. That's how I am able to wipe the lines off. At first, anyway. This way I can just paint 'somnambulistically' as you say.

I prefer the way I am painting now, slower and more thoughtful—that is less linear thinking. There are many ways to think as you know. If the hand or trumpet is very familiar or skilled—like you have 'your chops down'—you can switch gears. Called 'in the pocket'. I listen to the radio or play music but I don't want to move, so it's mostly the radio.

I am trying to figure out what our hideous government is up to. It's a game because they know and we spend all our time trying to find out. All the TV and almost all media is tightly controlled by pentagon / corporate interests so it's all spin and now simply propaganda. That is how bad it is here. I don't know if

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people in Europe are aware of that. Maybe they think we are stupid warmongers. Or maybe we are. Anyway, it is so obscene that this war in Iraq never stops. Which is why I wanted to do a painting related to how I feel about these people in power here.

They rule with fear and greed. They are very obvious too. So I am an anti-war activist, and believe Bush [Cheney] should be impeached. In NY everyone hates him. So I want to make a painting connected to what I think about it, besides what is dark matter and what to eat next.

Now that I'm done painting that, I will read books and hang out with my family whom I have missed very much. Then I will miss my studio and need to huff paint fumes.

I was painting abstract because I wanted to see what it would look like. It was new to me, but not a new form of painting in the sense of that linear progression that made everyone commit suicide in the fifties. That would blow. I have to enjoy making it, otherwise I would commit... Probably not though. Maybe I would smoke.

I disagree that abstraction comes from surreal, except maybe like Matta. Yes, I know people think of De Kooning or some fuck, but my paintings have 0 in common. Mine are lines. That's all. Sometimes I fill them in. They would think I am retarded. Or a 'girly man'.

That's the whole idea; what I was painting about in my early work—that I just want to be able to do what I want, like a guy, without being raped or ignored. That's what my early work was about. I was pissed. I had been beaten near death and it wasn't a crime because I knew him!

The laws have changed since then, but a lot of the behavior continues. People can effect change in their own small way. I was never a student of feminist studies or anything. I painted my life as I saw it. But there was never any reference to myself in my paintings. The ideas were presented as a sociological problem. However, because I was attacked for these depictions of reality [I am not a propagandist] I talked about why I painted them. In this way I found out that I was not alone and in fact my experiences are common! It encourages others to do what they want as well.

Of course I am a painter so it changes as my focus changes. I have done that already, so it's not where I am at. All those 'bad girl' / 'victim art' labels are shit. Is Picasso's Guernica a whiney indulgent 'victim-art' painting?

Who do I like better Matisse or Picasso you ask? Matisse rules! I actually don't get Picasso, I just pretend to. Jim Nutt was probably an influence too.

Where did I hang out and whom did I know after Cal Arts? The art world was a man's world then. There was a feminist art movement I think earlier but it seemed to disappear—at least in my experience. The galleries showed men, were mostly owned by men, and the women artists were very few and much older. Here you find out it is a man's art world. They let you think it is yours in school.

I know it is different now. Things change a lot. When I was in public high school we had to wear skirts until '71 even. Then we marched for peace in Vietnam. So things don't change. I just hung out at the Mudd Club, crashed with friends, moved to London for the punk scene with girlfriends and went to seed. It was fun though. Then my brother dragged me back home to Chicago. I lived in the basement and got fat and more and more depressed and tried to make art. I could only do what made me happy. No conceptual art—no self-conscious 'why bother' art.

So I got good at painting, but I never went outside again. I mean, never hung out and talked to people all the time like we used to. My friends are not all here anymore. Some moved out of New York, some passed on, and some got famous, like Jean-Michel Basquiat.

You don't really have an alternative lifestyle like we had then, because you have to make so much money now. Then I worked in bookstores, health food stores. I am the worst waitress. I dread that job.

You asked about Mike Kelley's work? I think he is my favorite artist. Kelley and Matisse. My work and process are completely different from Mike's, but around 1982 I saw this show of his at the tiny old Metro Pictures gallery in SoHo. It was about insects and it had giant paper insect eggs attached by strings through the middle of the room, with writings and illustrations stuck to the walls. It was really cool the way he trusted himself, and could follow through with something so unusual. I saw his writing with illustrations like badly drawn comics, which reminded me of my own weird stuff so I was emboldened. However, I am more formal, traditional—neatly contained as a painter. He is very brave and new.

Actually his work is serious and he writes a lot about it. I try to avoid this, but here it is. +

Rita Vitorelli is artist and editor in chief of spike. She lives in Vienna.