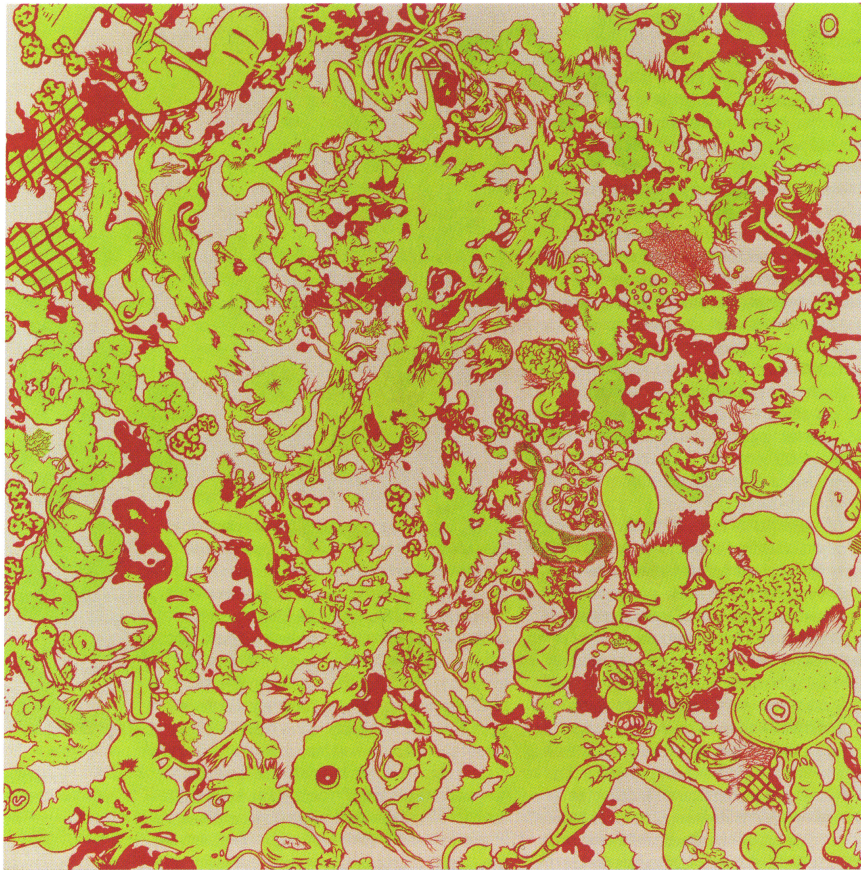


REGEN PROJECTS

Latimer, Quinn. "Sue Williams." *frieze* (October 2010) pp. 244 – 245 [ill.]

frieze

Sue Williams



Sue Williams
Northwoods
2008
Oil and acrylic on canvas
1.8x1.8 m

Galerie Eva Presenhuber Zurich, Switzerland

Strange are the paintings that simultaneously recall full-sleeve tattoos and Wedgwood china, Peter Saul's cartoonish crassness and Willem de Kooning's late, ambient lyricism. Improbable union? Sure, yet Sue Williams' sheer talent and weirdness ably broker that marriage. The American artist's recent large-scale works, which were shown in this small show at Galerie Eva Presenhuber conflate her early rough-hewn figuration with its alarming, violence-driven narratives and despondent grisaille with her later forays into decorous abstractions and DayGlo. The results are impressively disorienting: the paintings are as intricate and mesmerizing as tide pools, if said tide pools were filled with flayed bodies, dripping penises and exploding innards.

From afar the paintings are all patterned ground and swirling arabesques. Up close, Williams' cartoonish filigree evokes the fight scenes in old comics, in which churning, organic

forms indicate action and commotion. Her bulbous, whirling forms suggest speech bubbles without the 'POW!' and 'BAM!' that cartoonists require. See, for example, *A System in Terminal Decline* (2010), one of four large oil and acrylic paintings that sticks to shades of orange-red. The dense canvas leaves an impression that is both corporeal and cosmic: exploding bodies, exploding solar systems. Up close, you weigh the options: blood ventricles or tree roots? Intestines or nuclear clouds? Associative and allusive, the forms whatever their provenance are violent and violated, and it is difficult to ascertain the perpetrators and victims. Situated in such uncomfortably gorgeous grounds, they are both at once.

Williams has long been the exception among contemporary female artists who in their work keep their feminist politics to a very subtle roar. Her explicitness about sexual violence which populates both her practice and her past was the subject of a conversation she had with Nancy Spero in *BOMB* magazine in 1993 (the same year Williams was included in the Whitney Museum of American Art's 'The Subject of Rape' an exhibition with a political forthrightness one

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cannot conceive of in a major museum today, the 2007-8 'WACK!' survey notwithstanding). Inspired by a 1992 painting by Williams entitled *Are You Porn or Anti-Porn?* which features a woman being drawn and quartered, Spero noted: 'There's a slogan: "Pornography is violence against women." It doesn't say that it causes violence. If it depicts it, is that in itself, violence against women?' Williams answered, perhaps not wryly: 'You can say that men cause violence to women, so they should be banned, not just the photos. The photos aren't the violence.'

If such sexual violence was Williams' main thematic concern in her practice in the 1980s and '90s, in the past decade it has turned first to the imperialist policies of the Bush administration and, more recently, to the right-wing fervour that has gripped the US since President Obama's election. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan bridge both presidents, and it is not difficult to read Williams' exploding body parts as an allusion to suicide bombers and IEDs. Her titles also make overt hints: they include warnings about the Tea Party movement (*Danger on the Right*, 2010), and perhaps a sardonic approximation of the Obama administration's abilities (*Yes, We Can*, 2010). An older work, the fluorescent-green painting *Golfing at Northwoods* (2008), unites both sides in its evocation of the pastime that occupies politicians while kids are being killed overseas. The title alludes to the elite, once all-male golf club in California, while suggesting Operation Northwoods, the '60s-era CIA proposal to commit acts of terrorism on US soil, then blame them on Cuban communists.

The power trips (and male dominance) of American politics are not necessarily unrelated to the power trips (and male dominance) of sexual violence, and Williams is not scared to explore this. Several smaller works, in ink or oil on vellum, spell this out in titles like *Hot Sex and Violence* and *Death Squads* (both 2009). Though these cartoonish works please, they do not seem far enough removed from the graphic art they conjure. In this, they stand in contrast to the success of the larger canvases, which seem defiantly, mysteriously contemporary in their pairing of 'apolitical' abstraction and political figuration (along with the 'women's work' of decoration).

Considering this, it's strange that, in 2008, Roberta Smith wrote that these large-scale paintings 'should be the last of their kind [...] They could almost be printed textile or wallpaper designed by some lapsed Disney animator added into rebellion by years of family fun [...] Ms. Williams has much better things to do. Smith's odd 'family fun' comment notwithstanding, it appears, thankfully, that Williams does not have better things to do. 'I wanted to make some art that would communicate and protest' Williams recently noted. She has succeeded in both.

Quinn Latimer