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SUE WILLIAMS

BLUNTNES AND THE POWER OF HUMOR



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Interview by NeueJournal

Sue Williams and I are sitting in the basement of 303 Gallery discussing who we think is the best James Bond. “Sean Connery is the man,” Sue says, perfectly concluding the topic before moving on to show me the book of her work, which sits between us. Published by JRP | Ringier, this is the first monograph for Williams’ work, although her graphic, doodle-like art has been aptly causing a stir for years. Williams’ work is an important component of the cannon of feminist art, and coming from a background of abuse, she is a leading voice for the cause – approaching the subject with bluntness while retaining the power of humor.

REGEN PROJECTS

NeueJournal: This is your first comprehensive monograph. What feelings arise from looking at your work curated and summarized?

Sue Williams: It's interesting to see their choices; I think some of them are funny. They did a nice job with the colors, because some of the pieces are fluorescent and sometimes they come out as brown in print. In the end they picked the better ones.

NJ: Do you feel your entire body of work is part of an ongoing conversation, or is there autonomy to each piece you create?

SW: I think each piece is getting ready for the next one, and you are getting ideas when you finish one. They sort of evolve like doodles – that was my goal in the first place; how to make a painting out of doodles. Then I was doing a study about women and anti-violence, which was predicated from past. I used a lot of statistics; 75% of women who are murdered are murdered trying to leave their partner, so I brought it into the painting. I became interested in traditional painting and learning how to do it, but I always go back to drawing my little people. It's a kind of combination of everything; I'm having fun doing them.

NJ: Your art is very autobiographical. Do you think that it's become more reflective of your humanity throughout the years?

SW: Yes, the making of genitalia and abstract genitalia is more reflective of humanity. I was also involved in the anti-war movement and felt that it should be connected in some way. I want to be connected to my work, so that is how I got back into imagery.

NJ: Why do you think the general public finds female anatomy so daunting?

SW: That's a good question. I guess you just don't see it around so much. What goes on inside there is a mystery to people...maybe they never turned the light on? (laughs) I don't know! When I was doing that I got so much criticism so I thought, "I'll just do whatever I want and not put words on it so they won't know what I'm doing." And I got a reaction.

NJ: What is your first memory of painting?

SW: When I was little I was always into arts and crafts. I went to art camp and took classes in junior high, I always had an art thing going on. I went to CalArts in 1972 and back then there weren't really painting classes. I wanted to learn the fundamentals of painting and how to use oil paintings. John Baldessari, who was the greatest person there, had burnt all his paintings so it was like paintings weren't good or something.

NJ: What is your greatest fear?

REGEN PROJECTS

SW: Being stuck in an elevator! And somehow elevators know you are afraid to get stuck.

NJ: If you had to describe your work in three words, which would they be?

SW: Funny, obnoxious, likable... that is what I feel about it. I try to find obnoxious color combinations; I would say things that clash seem to make something interesting, however I am really quiet nowadays.

NJ: It's interesting you say you are quiet but your work is so loud and honest.

SW: That's so nice, well you can do anything you want in the privacy of your studio. I used to do these obscene things. I remember I was at the Whitney Biennial and this docent tour came around and I would say, "Oh god don't make me talk about my work to these nice old ladies."

NJ: If you could only listen to the music of one artist/band for the rest of your life, who would it be?

SW: Bob Dylan. He just seems like he is from somewhere else. I saw him a long time ago with the band. His music is so important and when I was in high school I would listen to him, and now I still listen to the same songs. It really becomes part of your own brain.

NJ: What's the best advice you've ever gotten?

SW: I dunno, I hear good advice all the time but I forget it. I can give you some AA slogans. Being isolated doesn't make you happy. It's the icky and the negative pole of the universe.

NJ: I used to really think that being isolated in strength and solitude made one brave.

SW: Solitude is being independent but open to others. Isolation is depending on yourself for everything and your thoughts, and humans just aren't made that way. Our neurosis can go away with other people and I built my life around isolation because of fear. But I have a daughter now...life is ok. Even if sometimes it really seems to suck.

NJ: What's the most valuable thing you know now that you didn't know ten years ago?

SW: That you can do whatever you want.

Portrait Photography: Chris Luttrell for NeueJournal