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Trauma Turned Abstract: The Painterly Evolution of Sue Williams

NATALIE HEGERT /MUTUALART DECEMBER 14, 2016



Sue Williams, *Johns Flag*, 2016, oil on canvas, 127 x 198 cm / 50 x 78 inches. Copyright the artist, courtesy Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zürich.

Sue Williams' latest works—large, raw canvases stained with lurid hues—spread out over the walls of Galerie Eva Presenhuber's Löwenbräu space, punctuated by a series of smaller, framed paintings on patterned textiles. The two distinct bodies of work on display here, separated by decades, give a glimpse into the evolution of Williams' painterly style, and provide a key into the visual lexicon that the artist has developed over the years. Much has changed in Williams' oeuvre, from the raw, yet coolly detached, paintings of sexual violence that first brought the artist recognition in the early

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1990's, and much has stayed constant—her biting sense of humor being a primary example.



Sue Williams, exhibition view, November 19, 2016 to January 21, 2017, Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich. Copyright the artist, courtesy Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich. Photo: Stefan Altenburger Photography, Zurich.

“I have a feeling that along with therapy, I should have learned hand to hand combat,” Williams said, in an interview with Nancy Spero, “because I’ve been in therapy a long time and I still feel I’m in danger of being raped and attacked.” The interview, which appeared in *BOMB* in 1993, vividly contextualized the cartoonish, caustic, autobiographical paintings that launched her career—paintings that depicted graphic acts of sexual violence, along with wry textual commentary. In one painting from this period, three brutal rape scenarios are rendered in sketchy grisaille, under a header reading, “A Funny Thing Happened On the Way To The,” followed by a lengthy list of seemingly innocuous locales—store, house, bus, dumpster, hospital, school, “or where was yours?”—a cruel comic strip illustrating the pervasive paranoia of the rape victim. “I’ve had so many really bad things happen to me,” Williams says, “...it just seems absurd.”

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Sue Williams, *Suffocating*, 1995, acrylic on fabric, framed, 43 x 39.5 cm / 16 7/8 x 15 1/2 inches. Copyright the artist, courtesy Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zürich. Photo: Stefan Altenburger Photography, Zürich.

Sue Williams was born in 1954, and grew up in Chicago, where the raucous comic styles of the Chicago Imagists, artists like Jim Nutt, Karl Wirsum, and Barbara Rossi, made an impression on her. Between 1972 and 1976, she attended Cooper Union in New York and Cal Arts in Los Angeles, studying under John Baldessari and “not learning how to paint.” After art school, she suffered a string of abusive relationships, echoing back to the violence of her childhood. At one low point, a man shot her and left her for dead.

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Sue Williams, *The Flow*, 2016, oil on canvas, 137 x 162.5 cm / 54 x 64 inches. Copyright the artist, courtesy Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich.

In her early works, Williams' past traumas come through with a cynical, colorless brush, in grotesque details and smirking captions. When her paintings were exhibited, most men took umbrage or dismissed her as a "nut," while many women identified with her stories of abuse. In any case, the paintings made an impact, and Williams felt that she could move on with her life, and her art. "That was the problem with getting all this attention," Williams admitted in the interview with Spero, acknowledging the danger of becoming known for a certain type of painting. "If you don't do that anymore maybe people won't be interested, or, is that a stigma?"

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Sue Williams, *Exit*, 1996, acrylic on fabric, framed, 39.5 x 42 cm / 15 1/2 x 16 1/2 inches. Copyright the artist, courtesy Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zürich. Photo: Stefan Altenburger Photography, Zürich.

But Williams' style of painting has been anything but stagnant. A 2010 retrospective survey of her work, curated by artist Nate Lowman, at 303 Gallery, in New York, showed the startling progression of her work. From her early "doodles," Williams' visual language expanded out and focused in, changing rapidly and constantly over the years. The show featured collages on effete wallpaper, monochromatic oil paintings covered with casual-looking drawings, layered works of ink on vellum, paintings of exploded cartoon body parts, sculptures made of plastic, dense paintings of throbbing organic forms, compositions featuring a few bold lines in candy colors swerving across the canvas, large abstract canvases channeling late Willem de Kooning, and a pair of furry slippers, covered with fake vomit. Throughout these disparate styles, her obsessions became evident: the possibilities of line, particularly the graphic, cartoon outline; glee in abstraction; sickly sweet color palettes and the innuendoes of the "decorative"; body

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parts, innards, and genitalia; and humor, in materials and message. Her “signature style” is there in all of it, but it is subject to wild degrees of experimentation.



Sue Williams, exhibition view, November 19, 2016 to January 21, 2017, Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich. Copyright the artist, courtesy Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich. Photo: Stefan Altenburger Photography, Zurich.

Over time, Williams’ work has veered more and more toward the abstract. “There was a time when the paintings had words and I wanted to express clear ideas and now I’ve gotten kind of arty,” as Williams put it, in an interview from 2014. Williams’ newest paintings, painted this year and on view now at Eva Presenhuber, are a synthesis of her many styles. From afar, they are composed of sweeps of color—a patch of bright turquoise, a swath of neon orange, cerulean blue, and blood red. Upon closer inspection, one sees networks of spindly lines working their way across the canvas, joining the color blocks like hubs on a metro map. Getting up even closer to the canvas, the viewer will notice the small details: images of houses, roads, bodies, hairy balls. Stand just an inch away, and the miniscule lines of text embedded in the painting come into view. “Trump Not Funny,” reads one such line.

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Sue Williams, *Trump Not Funny*, 2016, oil on canvas, 178 x 203 cm / 70 x 80 inches. Copyright the artist, courtesy Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich.

Williams is no stranger to politics. Though her lyrical abstractions may not strike one as addressing political content, Williams' use of titles and subject matter often directly refers to controversial current events. She titled her 2010 retrospective exhibition, for instance, "Al-Qaeda is the CIA," and images of the Twin Towers recur in her paintings. "I want to draw attention to issues; I want people to be informed," she said of her work, in 2014, "It's a scary time." These political issues, however, compared to the graphic depictions of violence in her early works, are not treated so explicitly in her recent paintings—rather they lie under the surface like a repressed memory. The attacks of September 11, the War on Terror, misogyny and hate run rampant, a president-elect who has boasted about sexual assault—Williams' newest paintings deal with the trauma of America. She has called her paintings a "refuge"; in them, the pettiness, stupidity, repulsion, and sickness everyday life is exploded into pretty abstractions.

Sue Williams at Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Löwenbräu Areal, is on view from November 19, 2016, to January 21, 2017.

—Natalie Hegert