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Harmon, Heather. "Sue Williams." CR Fashion Book (March 13, 2014) [ill.] [online]



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## SUE WILLIAMS

Curator Heather Harmon reflects with Sue Williams in the wake of her exhibition *WTC, WWII, Couch Size* at New York's 303 Gallery

Photographs courtesy of 303 Gallery, New York  
Words Heather Harmon

Above: *Philip Zelikow, Historian*, 2013, oil and acrylic on canvas, 74 x 134 inches

Heather Harmon: I was looking at your new paintings and thinking about your uncanny ability to make work that is politicized. Not only in terms of identity politics, but a politics that we all share: the World Trade Center, the idea of World War III, and the War on Terror. In this respect, titles often set context. How do you title your work?

Sue Williams: Usually it's afterwards—or maybe while I'm doing them—that something comes to mind. After I did one work, I thought, "Pleasantville," and it ended up looking like that when it wasn't supposed to. We don't think about Black-ops. We don't even acknowledge that we do

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them, and we don't like them of course. It's so weird—the dark side of things—but paintings make me happy. So they are about all the things that I think about.

HH: You have given yourself so much freedom in this current show. The paintings have a lot of the tightness one would recognize in your work, but they have exploded! There is so much liberty with gesture and the lines, in a way they are musical. There are a lot of new elements in this body of work—little animals or animal parts and the introduction of architecture. The viewer can see the Twin Towers and the shapes of buildings.

SW: I started doing the Twin Tower stuff in “Hill and Dale, Black-Ops” and it was the opposite of what I do: straight lines. It also has to do with the brushes and not wanting a completely smooth background. I started doing these and then it just took over. I was working with square brushes more and then using a rougher surface. I keep doing them now even though it's old. It's like J.F.K.—if you unravel that you can unravel a lot of stuff. I wanted to put information in them before, but now I'm trying to only be about the paint so that everything you think about will come out anyway once you're absorbed.

HH: The paintings in your current show at 303 Gallery are as radical as your early works. You have let yourself do whatever you want and have introduced a new cast of characters. Do you feel like you're starting to make a shift in your work?

SW: It's about being able to do what you want, but then there's this weird thing of, “What the hell are paintings supposed to look like anyway?” So you do whatever you want and then you have to decide if it somehow looks right in its own little way—whatever that is. Lately, I have a pleasant way of working. My paintings have become heinous, but I sort of like them.

HH: There is that fine line between attraction and repulsion, but this body of work has so much confidence in it.

SW: It is fun to not be hung up on trying to make sense. I used to think about that more—or not think about it. It's fun to be immersed, bodily immersed. I think it's like surfing, maybe. I like to throw myself in, so that I can get away from my perplexed, doubtful, anxious self. It's just like being submerged in the water; after a while you don't really think about anything else.

HH: There is a painting in the show with the title “Retire in Fla.”

SW: Yes, it's my dream. Well, we talk about where to go and we look at it. You could go there in the winter and then you leave, so you don't get caught in the hurricanes.

HH: But you're not ready to retire, you have to continue on these new adventures! Isn't it sort of in a way a building process? You've built off other ideas in the work and they continue and you build a visual history. This body of work is a really beautiful marriage of so many elements from your past work: the architectural, almost cartoonish early paintings merge with very gestural moments that maybe remind one of your large abstractions or the tightly rendered works that had a lot of different body parts. It seems like in this show, the old elements all came together and exploded with all of these new things. You've produced new explosions, like the filament lines coming out of really big bursts of color. It's like all the old friends in your work are meeting these new characters and they're all partying.

SW: They're having my retirement party! I used to be real fussy and now if I don't like the mess, I can do something else with it. I know how to make a mess until I like it, but it has a certain

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attack and not a fussiness. I let things happen, like smears. I'll wipe away something and make a mess and then enjoy what it looks like.

HH: There's a fearlessness in this show, you did try new things, but you didn't sacrifice what you're interested in to try them.

SW: I know. I felt like, 'Fuck everything, I don't want to paint unless I can do whatever I want.' I made this great, big hideous bird with a big spoonbill, a big stork, and then the Twin Towers, and I thought, 'I'll show you that you can look at the painting anyways.' I just tried to dispute the most obnoxious painting, but then slowly they developed into paintings that I liked—ones that made sense in a certain way—so that's how they happened. They came from being obnoxious. It's funny, because now they are probably going to change a little bit more.

HH: Yes, they're not submissive paintings.



*Hill and Dale, Black-Ops, 2013, oil and acrylic on canvas, 54 x 64 inches*

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*Ministry of Hate*, 2013, oil and acrylic on canvas. 72 x 84 inches