

# REGEN PROJECTS

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Art in America  
INTERNATIONAL REVIEW

## Nate Lowman Interviews Sue Williams

by *nate lowman* 09/17/10

Nate Lowman has curated "Al-Qaeda is the CIA," an exhibition of new works by Sue Williams. Here Lowman asks Williams about feminism, her drawing practice, and the artworks she won't show to her 16-year-old daughter.

NATE LOWMAN: Hi Sue.

SUE WILLIAMS: Hi.

LOWMAN: OK, first question. What year did you go to art school?

WILLIAMS: I went to art school in 1972. I went to Cal Arts and then I went to Cooper Union.

LOWMAN: And who did you study with?

WILLIAMS: In CalArts I had John Baldessari, and, will, it's hard to remember. Allan Kaprow was there. Other than that, it's all fuzzy. Oh, I think this guy named Michael Asher was there, but that doesn't count. [LAUGHS]



PHOTO BY JACK SIEGEL

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LOWMAN: Who was the funniest character at CalArts?

WILLIAMS: 1972 was pretty cool because it was still really weird. They had this Halloween I remember. I was just this little 18-year-old from the Midwest who didn't know anything about art, or about *anything*, and all these grad students... how they were running around, they were very peculiar. One of them hit a rabbit on the way up and then just dragged it around with them. And you know, guys dressed like girls and girls like guys and I was so confused.

LOWMAN: I have heard that CalArts and Disney have some sort of relationship regarding animation, and I was wondering if you think that had anything to do with your interesting cartoon-ish figurative rendering of things?

WILLIAMS: Oh, I really hope not.

LOWMAN: I didn't mean that you were subliminally forced to draw Mickey Mouse; I meant more like if you were aware of it and had any relationship to it, whether it was humorous or reactionary. Was that even on your radar?

WILLIAMS: No. There was an animation school and those people didn't mingle. It was for Mickey Mouse and Republicans.

LOWMAN: You might not like this... I've always thought of your work as very humorous but I also like how it has a sophisticated anchor. But somebody once described your work as "victim art," which I think is way off the mark. Now it seems that you're taking back that term for yourself. You re-titled that sculpture for the floor with the term. But could you tell me a little bit about the myth-slash-saga of "victim art"?



WILLIAMS: I don't know who invented that term. I think it was invented during the 90's. It's kind of creepy when you think about it. If you're black, and you want to make a portrait of slavery because it's in your heritage, they wouldn't call that whiny self-indulgent victim. They can't say that. Or soldiers, they're asking for it, right? I'm just talking about reality. My reality, I just think it sucks, so that's why I'm putting it out there, so people can relate to it because everyone you know is in, or knows someone in these situations.

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LOWMAN: A couple of weeks ago, when I visited your studio, coincidentally that was the day that Obama declared the war in Iraq officially over, again. They said Operation Iraqi Freedom would turn into Operation New Dawn. I wanted to ask you, as someone who has great titles for their artwork, what do you think is wrong...

WILLIAMS: With his titles?

LOWMAN: With his titles, yes.

WILLIAMS: Well, I think New Dawn is a product placement for dish soap. And besides that they're misleading.

LOWMAN: [LAUGHS] Besides the lies. Or including the lies...

WILLIAMS: Including the lies, well, I think anything that has the word "freedom" in it, like "democracy," is very suspect, and has alternative motives. What were we freeing them from? From their lives-or freeing their spirit from their bodies.

LOWMAN: Tell me about the title of the forthcoming show at 303 Gallery.

WILLIAMS: Oh, the title? Well, everyone knows that Al-Qaeda was begun by the CIA, and they brought in Bin Laden as a figurehead, and they trained them in Afghanistan to fight off the Soviets, who actually came in because we were in there, and they brought them into Bosnia and Yugoslavia to start that division-and Chechnya. Wherever terrorists are needed, they are under the control of the CIA whether some of them know it or not. But I don't even think they're around anymore. Bin Laden has been dead since, I don't know, 2002. I think a lot of people do know that and I want them to know that it's OK to say that and that people should just get the word out that the War on Terror is a lie and we live under a false democracy.



SPLEEN AND SUCH, 2008. COURTESY OF 303 GALLERY.

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LOWMAN: On a lighter note, there is clearly no standard or typical career for an artist, but when talking about your work, people often note a rapid rate at which your paintings develop from year to year, aesthetically.

WILLIAMS: I think change comes naturally. It comes from being able to work a lot. Things happen.

LOWMAN: I think secretly people actually enjoy being surprised. Do you think that?

WILLIAMS: I don't know... I do. But I think sometimes they're looking for the signature they can relate to.

LOWMAN: If they come to realize how a person can see one thing and then see it in a different way or see a different thing, I think they do enjoy surprise. But they don't like a burst or shock.

WILLIAMS: It's very freeing to do whatever you want, and not to have to fit...what do they call that? Not like a logo thing.

LOWMAN: A personal brand.

WILLIAMS: Yes!

LOWMAN: It's a weird little ghetto you build for yourself when you establish your signature style. You feel like you've got to give people what they want and it's ruthless. I was always inspired by your fearlessness in that way.

WILLIAMS: Sometimes I wonder, "Why didn't I just stay doing doodles?" [LAUGHS] But you want to see what will happen with ink and I like looking back at old paintings and thinking, "I am really lazy."

LOWMAN: Why do you say that? Because your new pieces are so much more painstakingly labor intensive...

WILLIAMS: They are labor intensive and time consuming but they're not as risky in the way they're made. They're more like doodles. Maybe they get a little scary when they get out of control. Like the works I did with asterisks, which people didn't like. I liked them. Now looking back, I can say, "Oh, I like this one and feel sure about it," but sometimes when you're just experimenting, and you aren't sure if you have no business being there-until it's too late and no one buys it. And the critics hate you. I don't know what was wrong with those critics.

LOWMAN: I don't either.

WILLIAMS: I think they were men.

LOWMAN: I wouldn't doubt it.

WILLIAMS: One was a woman. I remember a woman saying that only men bought my paintings because they liked seeing women portrayed as victims.

LOWMAN: Oh yeah. It's not true. I know women who own your paintings. They're cool ladies. They're great. I like that critics address the business of art in ways that only compromise it.

WILLIAMS: Yes, like saying, "The pricier ones are in the back!"

LOWMAN: I had a lot of fun working on *They Eat Shit and Die* with you. It's essentially a sequel to *They Eat Shit*, which is a book that you produced with the San Francisco artists in 1992. Was it fun to revisit that book while we were putting together this mini retrospective?

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WILLIAMS: It's really gross, that's what I was noticing. [LAUGHS]

LOWMAN: It's so funny though.

WILLIAMS: You have to think about my 16-year-old. And then it's horrifying.

LOWMAN: Your 16-year-old daughter contributed drawings.

WILLIAMS: But she hasn't seen *They Eat Shit*.

LOWMAN: Oh no.

WILLIAMS: I know! I thought maybe I should take some things out but then it got complicated.

LOWMAN: Was there a time that you felt to be a woman and an artist was to be feminist?

WILLIAMS: I just figure all women are feminists unless they really hate themselves.

LOWMAN: I have a relationship with my generation, which I don't know how to define because I'm in it. It's



something I think about a lot, what inspires me about my peers. But I learned about you in art school.

WILLIAMS: Wow, weird.

LOWMAN: So I think of you as a different generation even though I think of all of the artists that I know and enjoy as my peers. I'm curious, because you're watching the historicization of your generation. I was curious if you felt that specifically being an artist was a type of feminism.

WILLIAMS: You mean because at the time there were hardly any women artists? When I was in high school, I felt that you could do whatever you wanted, or I had that impression. If you really wanted to. Even at CalArts people are pretty cool so you feel like you're the same as the guys. But then

something happened. The painter world was very macho at the time.

I never thought about it as careering. I don't know what I thought happened but some of them did think that once they came to New York and started showing at Mary Boone. And all these women who were really good artists and did advanced conceptual things, they just never made art again. And I didn't for a while, either. Because there didn't seem to be any energy, and these guys were off in little lofts in New York doing careers and stuff.

AL-QAEDA IS THE CIA OPENS TONIGHT, 6-8 PM. 303 GALLERY IS 547 WEST 21 STREET, NEW YORK.