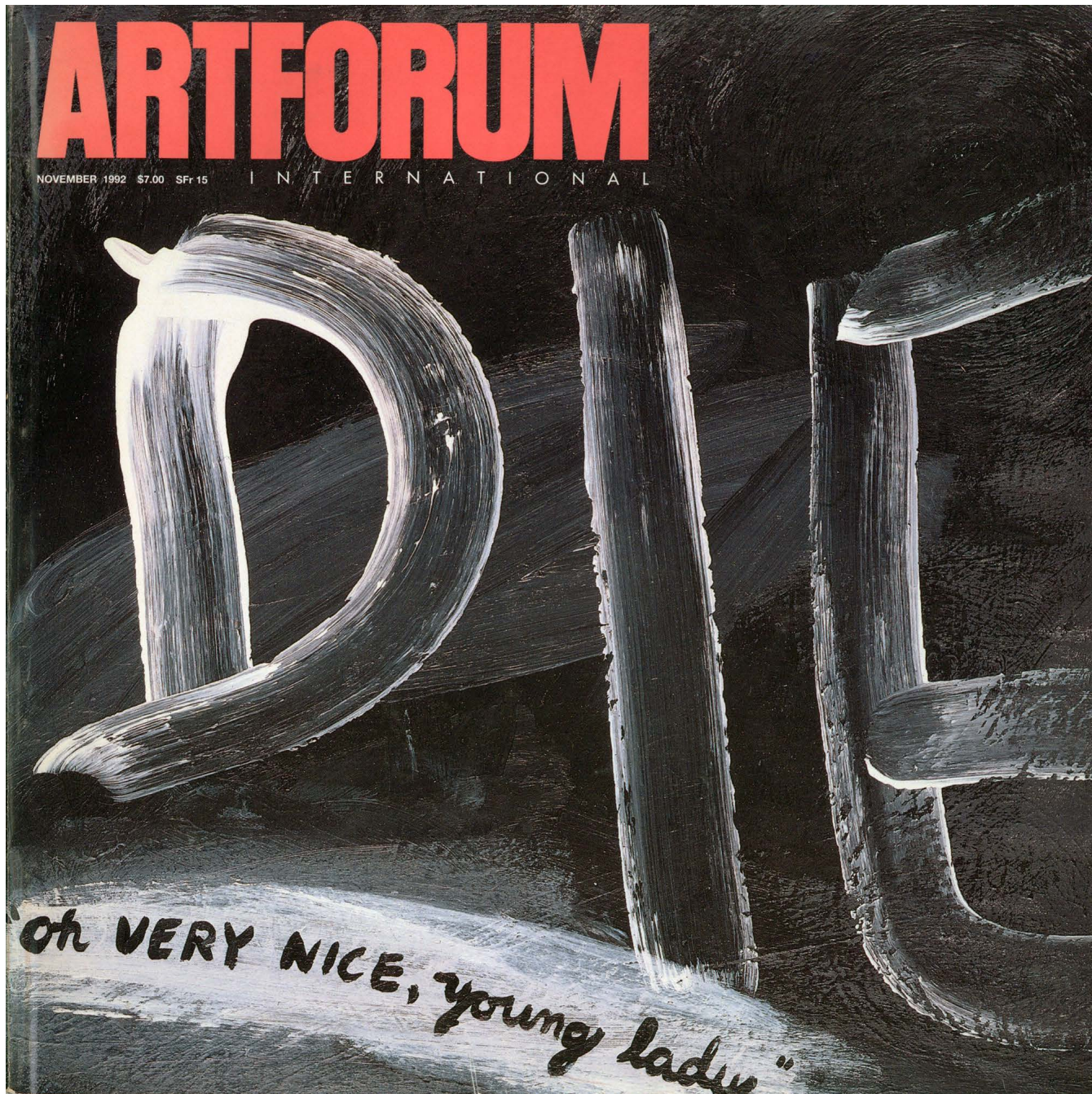


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Cameron, Dan. "Reverse Backlash: Sue Williams' Black Comedy of Mirrors." Artforum (November 1992)
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REVERSE BACKLASH

Sue Williams' Black Comedy of Manners

Dan Cameron

For a growing number of viewers and artists, Sue Williams is the first painter in recent memory to plunge deep into the taboo-ridden areas of the psyche and come back not merely to tell the tale, but to poke and prod her viewers into cheering her along. The accomplishment of her recent work—a no-holds-barred attack on misogyny and violence toward women, carried out in the surprisingly conventional media of painting and occasionally sculpture—is far more than a mere overhaul of the cartoonishly diaristic style of image-making that brought her to critical attention during the waning of the '80s. On the contrary, a series of very recent shifts in the art public's thinking about feminism, activism, figuration, and painting in general has thrust Williams and her work to the center of an ideological tug-of-war that seems to be pulling from every direction at once. Williams' art is possessed of an in-your-face spirit; indeed, she effortlessly flips reified critical discourse back on itself, lifting the veil off its dehumanizing smugness. Though far from preachy, she never lets us forget that we are a bunch of overweened mammals with a startling propensity for treating each other (and ourselves) like shit.

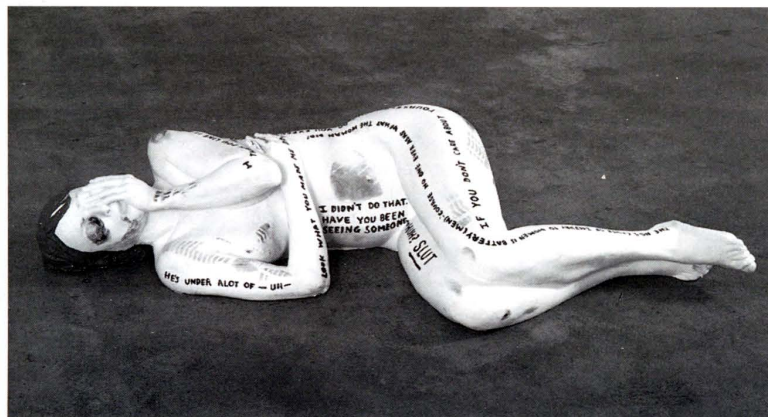
This isn't to suggest that Williams is antidiscourse—she's just scornful of

dry rationalization, and insists that feminist critique be in contact with the crises of everyday life. Alternating evenly between a mock-adolescent gallows humor and unadulterated ferocity, she jabs relentlessly at her own and others' wounds. The images in her 1991 exhibition in New York were sufficiently hard-hitting that they actually entered my dreams. In *Couples*, 1990, there is an unforgettable vapidness to the four middle-aged slob who sit grinning in their yard, oblivious to the violent assault taking place just inside the kitchen window. In *Mom Feels Left Out*, 1991, a quiet violence pervades the dinner table where father and son bond shamelessly while ignoring the silently suffering third party. The jolt these works convey to our collectively deadened sense of moral indignation arises in part from their prepossessing mixture of naïveté and violence, a Williams signature that may at first seem rather a simple affair. The viewer may wonder, too, whether her somewhat tangled storytelling perhaps suffers from a lack of objectivity. On closer scrutiny, though, it becomes clear that what we may first experience as a painterly form of hysteria is in fact a cannily crafted voice.

That voice has been honed on the lessons of certain of Williams' immediate

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predecessors. Clinging relentlessly to the role of bearer of bad news, for example, she calls to mind Cady Noland, another diehard pessimist. Like Noland, Williams treats the spectrum of interactive behavior today as symptomatic of a broad-based conspiracy of violence. But where Noland places herself in a position of unquestionable moral superiority over her subjects, Williams charges her work with the guilt of long codependency. Williams' work also picks up where the stream-of-consciousness blue-collar anarchy of Mike Kelley's rambling, conspiratorial texts left off a few years ago. And she helps herself to generous dollops of the idea of collective victimization explored in Barbara Kruger's all-purpose use of the term "we." Unlike Kruger, however, whose work always suggests some sort of authorial distance, Williams never strays far from what she herself has tasted and touched; and compared to Kelley, she is relatively little interested in class rage. Rather, she is committed to subject matter that most artists reared in a male-dominated society still refuse to go near: the ritualistic need experienced by many of us, both male and female, to build ourselves up by tearing women down. Such violence is not ancillary or saved for special occasions, but is part of the social contract. This strikes Williams as so unspeakably sad she just can't seem to stop laughing.

It would be an error to portray Williams as just another disseminator of received PC wisdom. The images she dredges up from her private wasteland must be deeply and intimately disturbing to most viewers, regardless of gender, race, or political affiliation. No redemption shows through in her painting, and nobody learns anything along the way, because each character has been reduced to a caricatured statement of his, her, or its role in the narrative, from the young girl clutching a kitten as a grown man shakes his genitals at her to the faceless worker flattened by a Richard Serra sculpture. Williams tends to view everything through a murky-gray comic-strip lens, one that has both victim and victimizer playing out gruesome roles, oftentimes supported in their purgatory by a dubious parody of mutual consent. Rude jokes, and a relentless focus on duck lips, horse genitalia, and art-world pretentiousness, support one's sense of the comic-strip aspect of Williams' vision. But these devices also serve to keep artist and viewer alive to the dimension of private experience, an effect that is crucial to her message of self-regeneration, of reteaching oneself to walk.

Williams' humor has a number of other functions as well. For example, given that her gestural style suggests a clear link (if of an ironic and distanced kind) to action painting, highlighting her interest in feeding off the subconscious (though she erases the nonsense that the New York School attached to that pursuit), her jokes seem to challenge the viewer's idea of what is and is not appropriate subject matter for art. The pain evoked by their bitter displacements makes one realize that such a concern is anything but academic. Here, too, one is returned to personal experience: the struggle of Williams' subject matter to get out from under the weight of art-world dogma affords a direct parallel to the struggles of victims'-rights advocates to have the battered

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child's or spouse's perspective taken seriously, even when distorted or muffled by fear, sorrow, and selective memory.

I'm sure Williams' painting provokes quite different reactions from those who see their own abusive acts mirrored in it and those who have received abuse. Though the artist's sympathies are obviously with the latter group, one of the most remarkable aspects of her work is the painstaking care with which she dissects the mutual pas de deux between victim and victimizer. The laughter this art provokes from its viewers is often of the nervous, skittish variety that belongs to those who are hoping they won't be found out. Witnessing these images, we witness crimes, even if publicly they are not always treated as such. What exactly is expected of our presence: are we mourning, testifying, or joining the struggle against violence? Or are we implicated in violence, whether as abuser or abused? Another facet of Williams' black humor seems to be a knowledge that a joke is never a one-sided proposition: the artist may use it to tease the unconscious into tipping its hand, but laughter is available to the audience primarily after the fact, as the hair of the dog that bit us. With its gaping wounds, distorted anatomical parts, and all-around messiness, the work suggests that the narrow line separating a benign or passive response to abuse from behavior that actually encourages it is one that many of us straddle on a fairly regular basis.

Rather than let us get tripped up by our complicity, Williams' paintings encourage us to treat the whole matter as a bad joke at our own expense. This may not be ideal, but it beats dragging a dark and dirty secret around for the rest of one's life. The artist may even be trying to use her own domestic victimization to help others: laughing about what one has suffered may be the first critical step toward avoiding the repetition of one's mistakes. Intentionally social in effect, Williams' paintings, in their funky explicitness, also demand a "social" reception; they deliver themselves up not so much to contemplative silence as to pointing, jostling, reading out loud, arguing, and nervous chuckles.

What is not a joke is the way Williams' work projects the unsteady path of painting over the next several years. We have become accustomed to feminist issues in photography and installation art, but who could have anticipated that certain male-inflected issues in painting could be cast as irrelevant from within painting quite as effectively as Williams has? Why settle for sensitivity and introspection, she seems to say, when you can revel in injustice and tweak your oppressors' consciences at the same time. Along with painters like Deborah Kass, Williams underscores the general principle of women artists building themselves up by taking on their misogynist colleagues. It is a radically new agenda for painting, one whose rules the artists are having to invent for themselves as they break into the public discourse. Williams is not simply exposing the conditions of her own and others' existences—she is digging into those conditions with both hands, with the energy drawn from the previously devalued meanderings of a woman's inner life. Over time, this development may well reap long-term rewards.

The mesmerizing effect these paintings have on their view-

ers stems from the issues they raise—not from what Williams or anyone else has said about them, nor from her image as a public figure. Yet the sheer novelty of her freewheeling, every-one-loses campaign has made her controversial. A great deal has been made of the fact that part of the motivation for Williams' art comes from her own past. She herself has been on the receiving end of domestic violence, which she argues overshadows all the other injustices perpetrated in the name of gender hierarchy. As I was writing this essay, a friend asked whether or not Williams was already to be included in art history—whether her work counted in more than a purely local way. I answered that it matters less whether or not she succeeds at being identified as part of that grandiloquent story than whether the issues she has raised, the doors of awareness she has opened, manage to keep from being slammed shut. I'd like to think that Williams has opened a real Pandora's box. □

Dan Cameron is a free-lance critic and curator who lives in New York. He contributes frequently to *Artforum*.

Opposite, top to bottom: Sue Williams, *Try to Be More Accommodating*, 1991, acrylic on canvas, 18 x 15". Sue Williams, *Irresistible Figure*, 1992, rubber, 12 x 57 x 24". This page, below: Sue Williams, *A Funny Thing Happened*, 1992, acrylic on canvas, 48 x 42".

