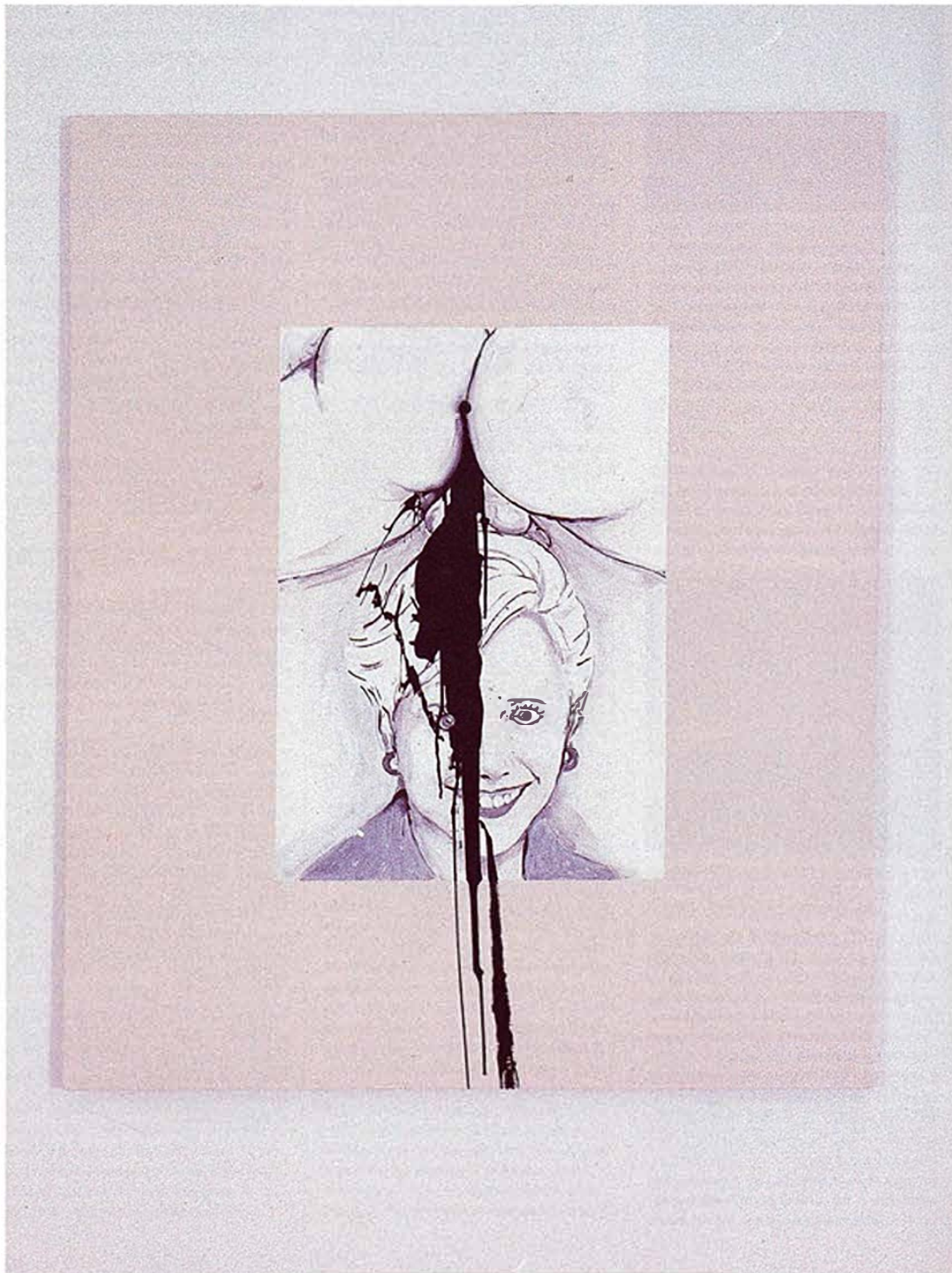


REGEN PROJECTS

Cottingham, Laura. "Painted Bad: Laura Cottingham on Sue Williams." Frieze Issue 5 (June – August 1992)



Painted Bad

Some of the most vital artistic practices of the last decade were led by a desire to infuse aesthetic conventions with social meaning. The prioritising of content is still evident in a new wave of New York artists, those emerging after Victor Burgin, Hans Haacke, Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger, Adrian Piper and the other leaders in the formalist refusal. Engaged with disparate formal concerns and working in various media, this younger batch of artists shares a commitment to continue dismantling the insular position prescribed for art by Greenbergian Modernism.¹ Eschewing tradition, most of these artists shun painting. Sue Williams doesn't, and her paintings are among the most vital expressions to be found in New York today – probably because she doesn't take the sanctity of the medium for granted.

Laura Cottingham on Sue Williams

Her paintings are raw, uncouth; expressive, without relying on the grandiosity of the expressionist gesture. Her images – of violence, humiliation, cruelty and anxious indifference – are wrought in a quick, cartoonish hand, as if the reality of her portrayals is too horrible and too undeserving of a more deliberate representation. The more persistent themes in Williams' work are the objectification and sexual abuse of women; not new themes in painting, for sure. But unlike the 19th Century's passive nudes, historicised gang rapes, and sentimentalised child molestation – or the similarly-violated female imagery of contemporary artists such as David Salle, Eric Fischl, Jeff Koons and Richard Prince – Williams doesn't evoke a romance with sadism. Her use of the ostensibly-pornographic uncovers the brutality implicit in sexual violence, a brutality which painting, like society, has traditionally preferred to suppress and/or eroticise.

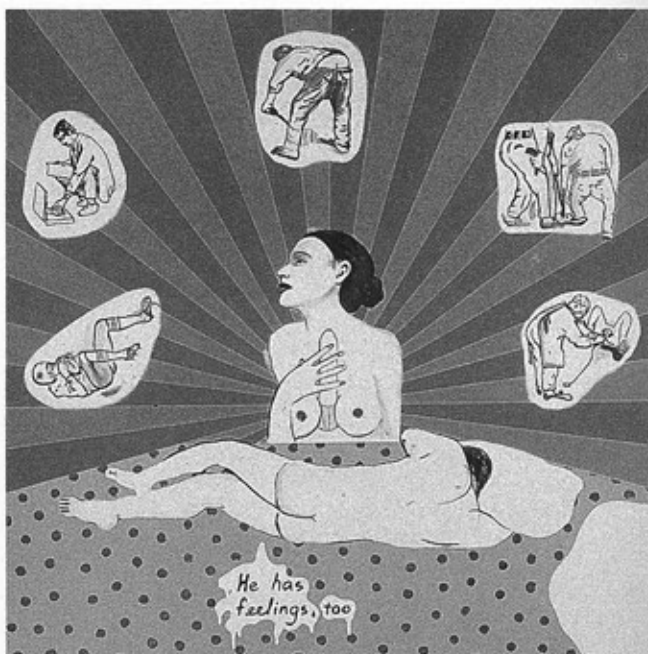
Many of her paintings are small, less than one foot square. Others are large but unstretched and, frequently, on low grade paper. Her work tends to imply a suspicion of overproduction: a refreshing sentiment to arrive on the heels of the overproduced 80s. The rough texture of her paint, the hasty necessity of her hand, also act as cues to the purpose of her art. This is not painting for decoration.

In one small square painting, *The Missing Piece*, 1991, a goofy man dressed in a clown suit stands in the centre of a living room. A penis protrudes from between his legs and at the end of his penis, a piece from a jigsaw puzzle is stuck. Like other works, including *Mom Feels Left Out*, 1991 and *Girl With Kitten*, 1991, this painting suggests child sexual abuse. While painting *The Missing Piece*, Williams remembered, 'a teenage boy used to babysit for us when I was six'... who regularly forced her to touch his erect penis.²

For Williams, the recovery of social content for painting runs parallel to a personal retrieval of repressed and painful experiences; much of her imagery is coaxed from memory, either of her own life or of those she has witnessed, been told or read about. The rememberings are often recast and generalised into odd parables and quixotic episodes. Sometimes the canvasses are overpopulated with clusters of seemingly unrelated events. Seldom do these mini-vignettes adhere to any temporal order and the images are often floating unanchored on the picture plane. Like memory, her paintings are framed in non-time and non-space. In pieces such as *Money is Congealed Energy*, 1989, or *The Sun Also Rises*, 1990, balloons of miniature pictures circulate around a central figure. Her stream-of-consciousness drawing style can be as unpainterly as the daily comics, yet she departs significantly from other painters who have used similar, cartoonish forms. While the playful, gestural quality of her caricatures may bear some resemblance, for instance, to cartoon enthusiasts such as Mike Kelley, Raymond Pettibon or even Philip Guston (especially his more harrowing portraits of the Ku Klux Klan), Williams does not extrapolate her forms from exterior social horrors. Her images are directly derived and coextensive with her own experiences.³ The sites of trauma she presents are not, of course, only unique to the artist, but universalised according to a continuum of common female objectification and abuse – from Manet's nudes, to popular automobile advertisements, to rape, to the caricatures of many of her male art contemporaries.

Of course, the construction of meaning according to female experience has always been relegated outside of the parameters of 'universal' (i.e. male) experience. Despite the importance of Williams' dialogue with painting and the new terrain of experience it posits into art, her work will no doubt be considered reflective of a marginal existence. Whereas the over-valuation of male expressions is so entrenched that the rape fantasies and female fetishism of other contemporary artists, such as Koons, Prince and Salle, continue to be accepted as implicit, normative and of universal importance.

Although it can be very droll, Williams' iconography is not intended to occupy a place of distant parody.⁴ Like other artists working for a 'new content', Williams is serious. When her work includes humour, as it often does, it is a function of an anxious necessity, not the product of a cynical posture. In *Try To Be More Accomodating*, 1992, for instance, the painting's title is scrawled, freehand, over a grey-black-white image of a woman's face being penetrated by four hands pushing four penises into four different bloody head and facial orifices. The picture is



brutal, the quirky text horrifyingly sarcastic. Her canvasses often employ shocking and unsettling words – to allow the viewer to more easily accept the severity of the imagery and to cue interpretation. The satire is always directed at the perpetrators of violence, from a position of refusal and mockery. Sometimes the sarcasm surfaces in conscious understatement, as in *Dessert*, 1990. In this large painting, a 'drawing' rendered in paint, a woman offers a food-laden plate in outstretched hands as a man slaps her, barking, 'Stupid Cunt!'. Underneath, precise, hand-drawn black letters consider: 'How much more constructive if he had expressed sympathy and suggested another dessert.'

Much of Williams' work is executed in grey hues. This shadowy reductionism evokes the eerie static of early television and the simplicity of aged snapshots. The elementary palette allows Williams to similarly date her iconography according to pre-colour-TV, pre-feminist 50s gender conventions, thus providing some psychological distance for the artist and the viewer. This reliance on a photo-similar palette bears resemblance to Richter's photo-paintings, especially *Eight*



Opposite page
 Top: Mom Feels Left Out
 Acrylic on paper on canvas
 Bottom: The Sun Also Rises, 1990
 Acrylic on paper on canvas
 This page
 Top: Try To Be More Accommodating, 1991
 Acrylic on paper on canvas
 Centre: Dessert, 1990
 Acrylic on paper on canvas
 Bottom: I Began To See, 1991
 Acrylic on paper on canvas

Student Nurses, 1966, the portraits made from newspaper photos of the women murdered in Chicago by Richard Speck; and *October 18, 1977*, 1988, the series made from police photos of the five members of the Baader-Meinhof group who died in prison, officially of suicide but most likely at police hands. Just as Richter, working around the documentary quality of photography and the limits of painting, chose the photo-palette to forefront the actuality, the lived reality of his subjects, Williams uses restricted hues to similar effect. Richter's series and Williams' work both attempt to reconstitute and re-member a horror of the contemporary past. But for Richter it is always a site of horror, never an instance drawn from his own experience. While Richter's paintings suggest how difficult it is for painting to historicise contemporary life, Williams suggests that painting's current power can reside in its capacity to render the historical through the personal.

The element of autobiography, of a psychically-determined intention, separates Williams from the dominant feminist-inspired American work of the last decade. Even Cindy Sherman's autobiographical portraits are not in any strict sense autobiographical, but fabricated from cinematic and painterly ideals. For Williams, her own subjectivity, hardly one step removed, guides her process and it is because of this subjective basis that her favoured media are drawing and painting.³ Memory could not be as easily rendered in photography, for instance, which must, inherently, rely on the present for its subject/object. Drawing, and its use of painting, allows Williams the most direct access to the articulation of repressed memory, an access fundamental to her process. Her work results from a freehanded, stream of consciousness, doodling process; as if she is engaged in a form of visual self-analysis.

Though Williams may not formally resemble the consciously feminist work that succeeded in New York during the last decade, her project is indebted to the disruption of gender imperatives actualised by artists such as Holzer, Kruger, Cindy Sherman and Sherrie Levine. The crisis of the female artist, as a perceived interloper into the visual tradition, was directly confronted by this second generation of female artists. Levine's appropriations of previous (male) artworks is perhaps the best embodiment of the crisis of identity and structure that characterised the last decade of art in New York. Levine's re-painting and re-photographing of recognisable and valued products drawn from the male visual tradition of the West was less a challenge to the concept of 'originality' per se (that, after all, was already a dominant message in Warhol), but rather a challenge to the presumption of masculinity and its assumed link to the normative, the creative and other signs of value. The same crisis of art's presumed masculine identity, and a similar demand for a voice, is apparent in Kruger, whose most fundamental legacy is not her advance in design but rather the

frieze

conscious point of view her work presents. For the first time the voice of the artist, forefronted by Kruger's continual reliance on text, is often self-consciously female. And in even more of a departure from the prescriptions of Western art and socio-political relationships, the viewer, in Kruger, is usually assumed to be female as well.

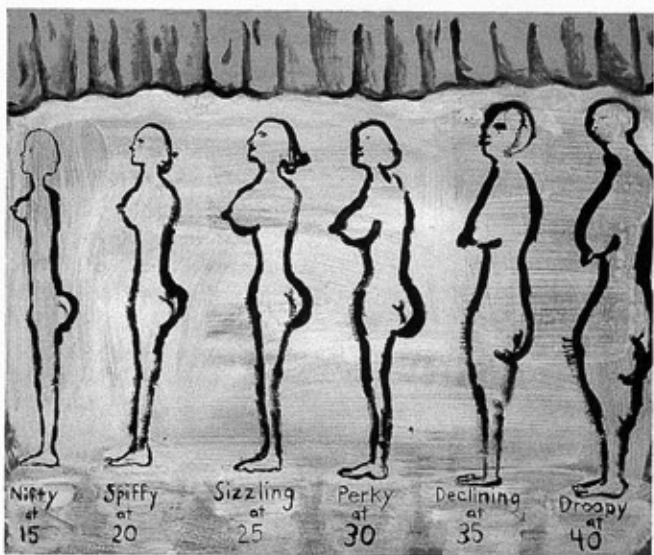
Working with highly-charged, violent and frequently pornographic material, Williams enters a previously all male preserve; and unlike the art historical precedents for sexual iconography, this work is not situated for voyeuristic sexual consumption. Williams includes the blood that is always lacking in both mainstream pornography and define art representations of sexualised violence. In one large black and white painting, *I Began to See*, 1991, a man's ass, penis and testicles hover over a bleeding and alert woman. The wallpaper behind the couple is vertically inscribed with 'I began to see that they didn't appreciate me for who I really was' - another careful verbal understatement in collusion with horrifying imagery. That fine art, but especially painting, has often collaborated with the ideology of female abuse is directly addressed in *The Inspired Collector*, 1990. In this painting, a policeman's bright light exposes an exaggerated breast of a woman collapsed on the floor. A large painting dominates the background of the canvas - it's of severed body parts and resembles a Salle, or even a Picasso. The exaggerated breast suggests that women are regularly victim in violence because of an irrational exaggeration of their anatomical differences from men, and that Western visual tradition, represented by the painting, has traditionally encouraged this exaggeration of female difference and the attendant devaluation and abuse that accompany it. The title also suggests that 'inspired' by the painting on the wall, the 'collector' killed the woman - or maybe even that the collector is the dead woman, who killed herself.

That women can objectify themselves, can collude with their devaluation through their own self-hatred is often suggested in Williams' work. In *Reincarnation Forum*, an orange curtain flanks the top of the canvas; under it six nude female images queue from left to right. Similar figures appear on other canvases and each time, the images are annotated and ranked by age, tracing the devaluation of female worth according to object status. So that 'Spiffy at 15' becomes 'Droopy at 40'; or, in *Better Luck Next Time*, 1989, 'Red Hot at 20' becomes 'Handy at 30'. Or in a painting such as *Cocktail Waitress*, a nude, animalised, anatomically deformed female form floats on an aqua-stained plane. The face has the ears of a cat, the breasts are grossly exaggerated as is the ass, while the legs and feet are nearly non-existent. The extreme objectification of the female form is so complete that the 'waitress' is rendered immobile, without feet to stand on, but still expected to serve. The plaintive presentation of female object status suggests not only how men

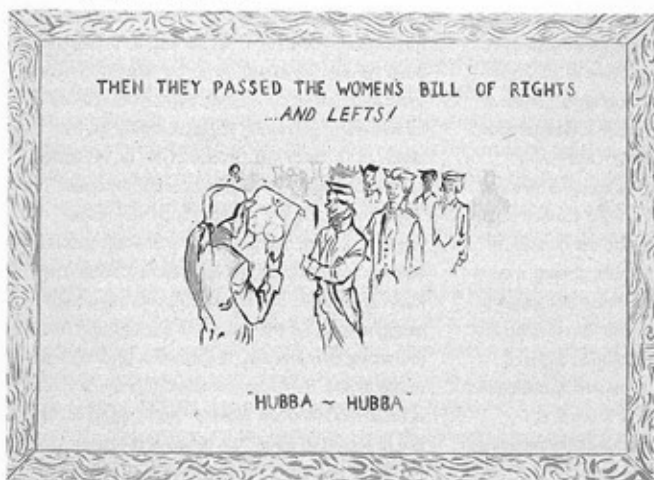


The Inspired Collector, 1990. Acrylic on paper on canvas

Reincarnation Forum, 1990. Acrylic on paper on canvas



The Bill of Rights, 1990. Acrylic on canvas



evaluate and judge women according to their sexual use value, but also how women often judge and devalue themselves according to the same sexist standards.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the criticism on Williams has tended to deny both the personal and sociological authenticity of her renderings. Like Freud, who invented his now debunked 'seduction theory' because he refused to accept the widespread existence of sexual abuse of women and so told his female patients their memories were fantasies, contemporary critics have consistently refuted the documentary quality in Williams. John Miller refers to Williams' horrifying narratives as 'adamant hyperbole';⁴ Joshua Decter calls them 'hyperbolic eruptions.' (my emphasis)⁵ And despite the ubiquitous instances of the (male) abuse of women that populates Williams' canvases, none of the critics are willing to cite any 'blame' to men – as if sexual abuse, like political positions in the government, had suddenly become equal for women and men. So that Jerry Saltz amazingly calls Williams' work 'equally contemptuous for men and women',⁶ and Lise Holst goes the farthest in revisionist apology by claiming that: 'If her men are alternately dangerous and foolish, her women are apt to be contemptible, buying into self-destructive visions of themselves that facilitate their own abuse.'⁷ With that and other statements like it the prejudice against survivors of abuse comes full cycle with the proclamation that they, somehow, 'ask for it', 'want and make it happen'.

There is no room for nostalgia or sentimentality in Williams' reconstruction of painting; her process is, unlike the Modernist agenda, a refutation rather than an acceptance of social alienation. The only faith she ascribes to painting rests in her determination to survive and expose both the past and the – historically created – present into which painting and other forms of representation have too often played an evil hand.

1. The concern with content is, of course, not new. For instance in 1984, the Hirshorn Museum, Washington D.C., mounted 'Content: A Contemporary Focus, 1974-1984', which included Haacke, Holzer, Kruger, Burgin and others. The next wave of 'new content' artists includes, among others, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Marlene McCarty, Gran Fury, Group Material, John Lindell, Lorna Simpson, Susan Silas, Jessica Diamond, Cady Noland, Donald Moffett, Deborah Kass, Nayland Blake etc.

2. All attributions to the artist taken from a personal correspondence dated March 13th, 1992

3. Similarly, Williams doesn't draw on a universalised or metaphorised iconography of memory, such as the Jungianism of Miro or the Freudianism of Dali, Magritte and other Surrealists.

4. Unlike the most well known contemporary purveyors of pornographic iconography – Koons, Fischl, Salle, Prince – Williams is a woman. It is impossible, then, that the fetishism, rape, sexual humiliation and abuse of women which Salle terms 'meaningless' and Prince articulates in 'jokes' could occupy the same experiential or psychic place for Williams, or any other woman.

5. Her newest group of work, exhibited in May at the 303 Gallery, New York, included a life-size sculpture. In *Irresistible*, 1992, a classically beautiful nude female lies on a table, in a vulnerable but self-protected position – the knees are pulled up to the chest, the hands cover the face, as if expecting an attack. *Irresistible*, formed in white rubber from a live model, is covered with boot marks and a tire track. According to Williams, she hired a model 'who looks like a Botticelli Beauty – to work with the idea of using men's ideal of the classical beauty to worship (which means, of course, have sex with, rape and beat if so inclined).'

6. *Artforum* review, September 1989

7. *Arts* review, October 1989

8. *Twisted Sister*, *Arts*, May 1989

9. *Art in America* review, Summer 1991