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## BORDERCROSSINGS

# PAINTING IN THE INTERROGATIVE VEIN

## The Recent Work of Sue Williams

by Barry Schwabsky

**O**n the eve of the last us election—the one we can only hope will turn out to have changed things in ways that still remain unpredictable—Sue Williams was still dissatisfied, to say the least: still pissed off by sexism, greed and war is more like it. And maybe that should go without saying, because the anger that was everywhere explicit in the "Project for the New American Century" paintings (2008) she showed last fall at the David Zwirner Gallery in New York was the opposite of irrational: it was sufficiently intelligent and well-aimed to make me wonder, on reflection, how I or any of us can be foolish enough not to be as angry as she is.

One thing Williams is not angry about is painting, but even so, she's still dissatisfied with it—with the art form in general and with her own relation to it in particular. I've been following her work for some 20 years now, and I can't think of anyone else during this time who has been so consistently productive in her questioning of painting, so

resolutely unafraid to tear up her own rule book and write up a new one—and then to put herself through the same process again and again. Who else has been so restless and passionate in her dissatisfaction with what painting can be and do for us in the present? She keeps redefining what her project is and thereby negating whatever settled definition one might have of her as an artist, just as she negates any settled formulation of the painter's task.

Thinking about Williams's recent work, haunted as it is by the nightmare that was the last eight years of American history, has put me in a retrospective mood. I've been looking back at some of her early work, the paintings and drawings from the early '90s that first caught the eye of a broader public. Those works, with their crudely stated imagery of sexual violence, are still as uncomfortable today as they were then. At the time, hot on the heels of Neo-Geo and the return of the cool, they were so wrong they were right, and so they remain. Look again and see if I'm not

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right. Until our own amazed reactions taught us otherwise, we might never have believed ourselves even capable of receiving such things as painting—I mean in the emphatic sense of the word, part of the great tradition. And don't think I don't realize, by the way, that by invoking the great tradition of painting with respect to a contemporary artist like Williams, I am opening myself to ridicule from both sides—on the one hand from those would-be upholders of tradition who consider that it is merely defiled by any connection to the art of today (above all when it combines such raw subject matter with such raw technique), and on the other from those avant-gardists after the fact who think that the Futurists really did succeed in burning all the museums. On the contrary, the art of the present is cut off from the past neither as a catastrophe nor as a liberation; it is joined to it as a paradox.

Looking at those early paintings of Williams's, I can affirm that they are still ugly. I will not prophesy of them, as Clement Greenberg once did of Jackson Pollock's paintings, that "in the course of time this ugliness will become a new standard of beauty." In this case I really find it hard to imagine how the paintings could ever look beautiful. And yet they make me want to say that though they do not *look* beautiful and never will, they *are* beautiful. Their beauty lies in the inner strength that allowed them to be painted.

Perhaps I'm thinking so much about this ugly beauty that I found in Williams's early work because I'm hoping it helps me put into perspective the very different sort of paradox—but likewise a paradox nonetheless—with which her recent paintings present us. Paintings of protest, they are far from the rawness of Williams's early work. The same adjectives with which Nancy Spero enthusiastically greeted Williams's work 15 years ago in a conversation between the two for *Bomb* magazine—"violent, cartoonish, obscene, voracious"—are if anything even more appropriate for the work she presented last fall, and yet how different they are! You might even call them pretty, in a Pop sort of way, with their zingy fluorescent colours and energetically calligraphic eddies of line.

In an interview with the *Village Voice*, Williams described her aesthetic in a surprising way. "A line has to be pleasant," she said. "It has to—you know—move in a certain way." What's striking about this should be obvious: her use of the word "pleasant." It's hardly what one expects to hear out of the mouth of any contemporary artist, and all the less from someone who makes the kind of art Williams has. If I didn't know her, if

I hadn't heard her say similar things many times over the years, I'm sure I would have assumed she was joking, or even that the interviewer had mis-transcribed her words. The funny thing, though, is that I never really thought about her unusual propensity for using such language until I saw it in print. One expects a contemporary artist (assuming they are even interested in talking about a line) to say he wants the line to be, say, "edgy" or "raw," but "pleasant"? Never. So why



does Williams say she seeks a line that is pleasant? My conjecture is this: other artists have to work to make their line edgy and raw; they have to fight an ingrained propensity to make a line that is insipid and without character. But for Williams a line that is raw and edgy comes so easily—as those early works showed—that she finds a greater challenge in not suppressing these qualities but rather in veiling them beneath an appearance that is "pleasant."

As a result, Williams wrong-footed some of her own most passionate early admirers when she unleashed some abstract paintings that, in their own way, were wilder and freer than anything in even her most brutal representations of sexual violence. Williams's paintings of the late '90s and early 2000s have often been likened to those of Willem de Kooning, but the most important connection has nothing to do with formal resemblances; it is a question of attitude—the attitude that de Kooning famously articulated in 1970 when Philip Guston unveiled his new representational paintings, only to face derision from most of his closest colleagues who now saw him as a traitor. "They don't understand what it's

1. *Road Map to Ferragamo*, 2008, ink and acrylic on acetate, 15 x 18".

2. *Some Ass*, 2008, oil and acrylic on canvas, 70 x 70".



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all about," de Kooning is supposed to have said, the only one of the old crowd to embrace Guston. "It's about freedom."

*Precisely.* With Guston it was the freedom, among others, to follow his impulse to change from abstraction to representation; with Williams, it was the freedom to change from representation to abstraction. And now, not so much to change back as to synthesize the two. These massive revisions of one's own project are not recantations. They are not religious conversions. They are not about rejecting what one has done before but about seeing its limitations. And because Williams's work is always pushing toward

its own extremes, it keeps on encountering its own limits and then breaking them.

In the past—and still today, though less prominently—artists, critics and theorists sometimes conceived of abstract art as an embodiment of the essence of all painting, even, one might say, its truth. For Williams, it was never the case that her abstraction represented the essence or truth of her previous work. Rather, it was a development of certain possibilities inherent in it, but only at a price—that of its specific content. Abstraction allowed for the disclosure of a form of feeling but not that of its occasion or object. This is why Williams has broken the limits of her own work



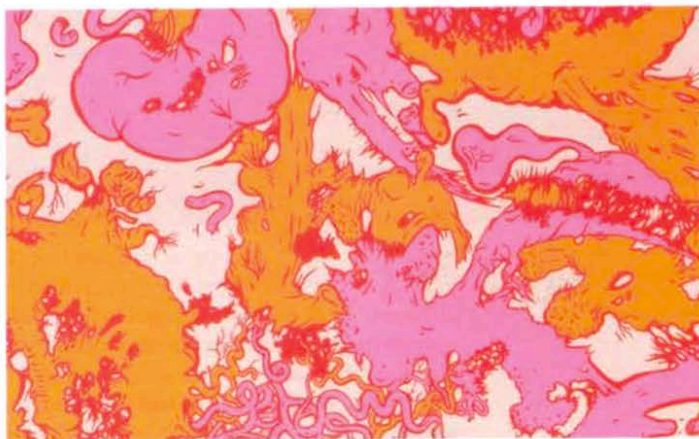
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yet again. For her it has become clear, abstraction was not about placing a taboo on representation. She never renounced representation, merely abstained from it for a time. And yet, as different as her new paintings are from those of a few years ago, it would not be quite correct to say that they are figurative once again, or even to say that they are no longer abstract. If anything, they belong to a hybrid category, what might be called *abstraction with subject matter*, or possibly *allegorical abstraction*.

How can abstraction take on discursive subject matter? Basically, in two ways: either by incorporating some representational or at least referentially suggestive imagery, or by directing the viewer's interpretation by means of language, especially titles. Williams uses both methods. The new paintings can be described as all-over abstractions with bits of imagery mixed in. At first glance you wouldn't notice these image fragments—or even at second glance, maybe. They've been worked in at the micro-level, woven into the pictorial texture almost as if by chance. The images are of things like body parts (both external



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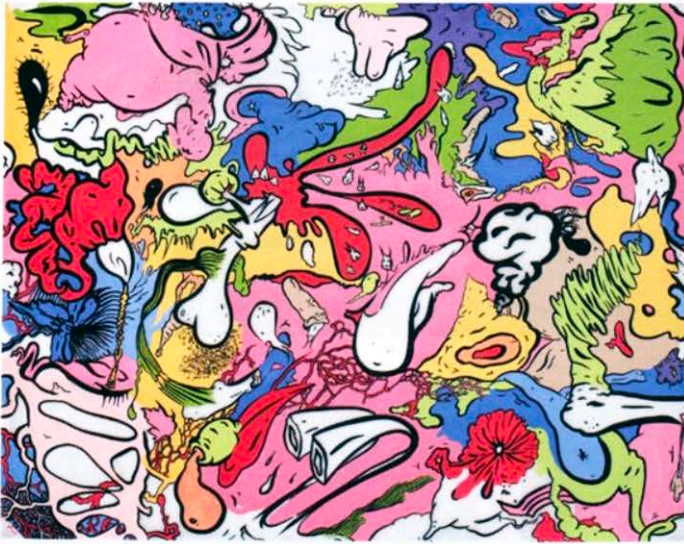
and internal) and consumer goods. But perhaps the most pervasive image in these paintings is something that almost isn't an image, something that's at the very border between representation and abstraction: the image of an explosion.

If you've ever paid attention to comics—and you surely have, as a kid if not lately—then you've seen the kind of explosion I have in mind. It's a



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representation of centrifugal energy, with lines swirling out in all directions, and woven through with curling trails of smoke. Here and there, in the midst of it, one makes out the jetsam of whatever it is that's exploding. Like the draperies of certain Gothic statuary, whose intensely agitated folds break free of their representational function without actually denying it, such explosions represent a moment within the representational framework



of the comic strip when the artist's imagination can break free of representation while still being contained by it. The same kind of thing is typical of representations of fist fights in comics. What one sees is an essentially abstract cloud of dust shot through with linear configurations bespeaking the fractious energies involved, and maybe a couple of arms shooting out of the blur of it all. Because the figurative aspect of such representations of clashing forces is reduced to a minimum, the artist has nearly unlimited freedom within the convention; paradoxically, it is an essentially decorative moment with the overall figurative framework of the strip.

Such decorative explosions are, I believe, the model for Williams's approach to her recent paintings, including the "Project for the New American Century." If you go looking for images of the phenomena she evokes through the paintings' titles, you'll have a hard time finding them. Yes, you will see a shoe if you look hard enough at *Cole-Haan*, and maybe even some sporting goods in *Golfing at Northwoods*. And there is definitely some ass in *Some Ass*. But that's hardly the point. What you won't find, by any means, in *Leo Strauss, Theoretician* is a portrait of the University of Chicago philosopher who is said to

have inspired the neo-conservative movement; his argument that the work of many philosophers contained both an exoteric meaning for the people and an esoteric meaning for an elite has been taken by some as an encouragement of deception as a political tool. Likewise, *Market Logic* makes no attempt to convey a specific economic theory, nor does *Two Parties* represent the American electoral system.

What the paintings do represent is the explosive outcome of the attempts to use our electoral system deceptively to impose American political dominion and a neo-liberal economy on the world. But the question still remains: Why do so through such seemingly decorative means? Why represent such a thing using a "pleasant" line rather than a raw, broken, anguished one? The best answer is that the paintings showed the artist's spirit as anything but raw, broken or anguished. On the contrary, she was energized by her anger and eloquent in her disdain. That energy and that eloquence are their own rewards. This is possible, of course, because the artist has a different perspective on her subject matter. In the early paintings, she was working from personal experience. In the interview with Spero, Williams remarked that as a woman she wished she'd learned hand-to-hand combat, because "I still feel I'm in danger of being raped and attacked." By contrast Williams—like most of the rest of us—knows the brutality of life in occupied Iraq only from news reports; her work makes no claim to represent the suffering that can only be known by those who have lived it. Yet she remains unable to ignore it. Thus the irresolvable irony that ideas like the ones conveyed in titles like *Small Kill Teams* or *1-800-Empire* are portrayed in works whose creepy details are entirely caught up in an abstract dynamic of great visual allure. You can't stop looking at these paintings. And then, eventually, you can't stop seeing what they are about.

Where does the transformation her country has registered since she painted her "Project for the New American Century" leave her work? I'd say their hard-won blend of anger and positivity looks downright prescient; felt by millions, each in his or her own way, it's what made the change possible. But looking forward, isn't there a danger of her art losing its oppositional élan? I doubt it. The wars are not over, in case you hadn't noticed, and women are still suffering. However outspoken or understated Williams's next body of work turns out to be, you can bet it will still have been made with the energy of the pissed-off. ■

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