

REGEN PROJECTS

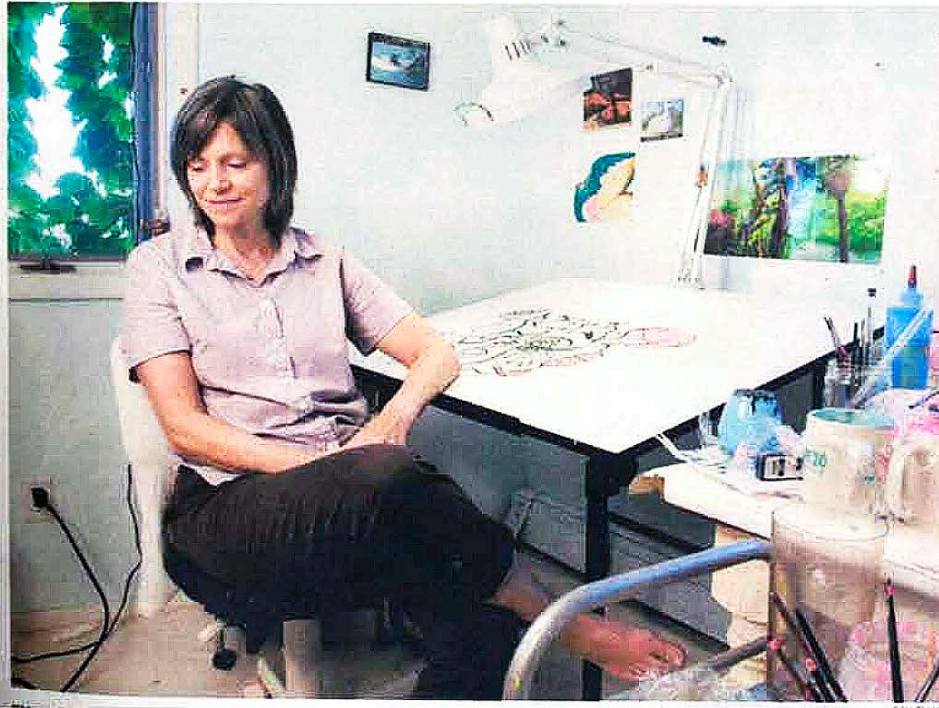
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Art

Pretty Colors, Unpretty World

Sue Williams digs down to the icky—a visit to the artist's studio before her new show



BY MICHAEL SPIES

I don't want to use any of that arty-jargon crap to talk about your work," I say to Sue Williams as we walk into her Montauk studio. "It's just cheap shorthand anyway—aristocratic, exclusive, and boring as hell."

I figured I'd expose my insecurities early: no use pretending I had a clue what "postmodern mannerism" meant—or, for that matter, "victim art" (a term Williams despises). Who does? I suspect some smarmy social club that congregates in the attic of the Met and, between games of leap-frog, invents these catchphrases to intimidate us common folk from walking into the galleries. It's like a damn dress code. For the last 20 years, critics have found profoundly new and innovative ways to stupidly characterize Williams's work, each successive term vaguer yet more daunting than the last.

I sit down across from Williams and she smiles at me, placating my outburst. Her studio space is tight, the walls sparsely adorned with small drawings and paintings made by her

13-year-old daughter, Charlotte. I notice one in particular, of a bird. "That's Tossy," Williams says. "That's a portrait of our parakeet. She just hates me."

To our left is a big window looking out onto a newly built McMansion, a real eyesore on this quaint beach street. To our right is a large painting, the last that Williams is finishing for her upcoming David Zwirner Gallery show, "Project for the New American Century" (named for the infamous neoconservative think tank that has so influenced Bush administration policy). The painting, entitled *Market Logic*, looks complete to me, but Williams can't seem to leave it alone. She spots a small line, squints at it, then wipes it away vigorously with a dry paper towel. "A line has to be pleasant," she says. "It has to—you know—move in a certain way. If you're a writer, the equivalent would be the writer's use of syntax. It's something that's unique to the creator, your own world."

Williams, small-framed and unassuming, fidgets in her chair. She has dried paint on her forearms, and her graying hair is parted off to the side. She talks with the endearing

Disdained by her parakeet: Sue Williams in her Montauk studio

anxiousness of an extremely shy but bright-eyed child in the midst of a show-and-tell presentation. She's coy, and when she says the word "crap," she immediately covers her mouth.

But there's a stark contrast between the creator and the created. My mind reverts back to some of her earlier paintings. *Try to Be More Accommodating* features the comic-like face of a woman and four penises, each one plugged

Market Logic is a controlled whirlwind of dismembered, cartoon-like body parts.

into a different orifice: *First Morning Muzzle*, a mosaic of sorts, spotlights a pair of spread female legs with a grinning male face between them. But the paintings are far from crude: Like a good George Carlin joke, they tell a truth in an expedited fashion that's so surprising we can't help but laugh. Whether

it be sexual abuse, misogyny, or—in the case of this show—politics, Williams highlights and reacts to the absurd; her work is confrontational, but with a wink.

"The painting's entitled *Market Logic* because it just sounded right to me," she explains. "Like the rest of the paintings for the show, I wanted to make some art that would communicate and protest. I wanted to be like, 'This is our foreign policy.' On the surface, things look tidy, but in reality"—she rubs her head and thinks for a moment—"well, in reality, they're icky. I mean, I sit here and I paint all day. The weather is beautiful, but at the same time I'm looking out the window at this ridiculous McMansion and listening to some morbid lecture on the radio."

"Market logic" is an oxymoron, since, as we all know by now, markets function totally illogically. The perception of control is an illusion, the reality unpredictable. Williams, in her new show, is intent on bringing that nothing-is-as-it-seems world to the canvas, seeking to demonstrate her struggle for truth in a time when truth feels more subjective than ever before. *Market Logic* is a controlled whirlwind of dismembered, cartoon-like body parts, random material accessories, and plumes of smoke; it's as if a bomb has gone off. Technically, the painting is monochromatic—fierce red against a raw canvas—but the dynamism here is incredible: The varying, intricate lines and cartoon-like shapes are hyperkinetic. Williams is able to make a single color worth a thousand. I find myself drawn to her depiction of some intestines. "It's kind of, like—cute, isn't it?" she says.

While other paintings in the current collection work with similar images, Williams does manage to incorporate additional colors: resplendent orange, neon green, and saccharine pink. I ask her why she's avoided dark colors. "Dark colors," she says, "are not pretty."

We both stare off into space for a few minutes.

"Sue!" I say, startling her. "Lemme ask you a question."

"OK," she says, looking a little wary and nervous.

"Do you think you have a morbid or dirty sense of humor?"

Williams gasps and, for a moment, the air leaves the room.

"Oh, oh, no, no, oh, no," she says quickly, sitting upright in her chair and again covering her mouth. "I'm not aware of that at all."

There's a dramatic pause, then she gets up and walks over to *Market Logic*.

"I forgot to tell you," she says casually. "Right here"—she points to an image—"is a smiling, burning baby. Originally, I was going to call the piece *Sex in the City: Hot Fetus*. But then I changed my mind."

And with a straight face, she eyes the fetus for a moment, then returns to her chair.

'Project for the New American Century' opens September 11 at the David Zwirner Gallery, 525 West 19th Street, and will run through October 25, 212-727-2070