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IN THE STUDIO WITH: SUE WILLIAMS; In a Cheerful Groove, With a Plan and Serendipity

By MICHAEL KIMMELMAN DEC. 28, 2001

"SOMETIMES I come in here and just start heaving it around, but because I'm an undisciplined person, I try to have an idea first," Sue Williams says, more or less joking about the obvious before undertaking a big new canvas not too long ago in her studio in Brooklyn.

Ms. Williams first made a splash during the early 1990's as another kind of artist than she is now, doing crude, rebarbative, sometimes outlandishly funny works about the tribulations of women. Her paintings were part autobiography (she had been a battered woman), part vented rage, part satire. She painted a tearful baby-faced young woman holding a kitten seen through the hairy legs of a naked man, as if done by a child, in black and white. Another picture took aim at Pollock's macho aura in the style of an underground comic illustration. To a Whitney Biennial, most notoriously, she contributed a pool of plastic vomit. Critics predictably called her a victim artist.

Then gradually she began painting very different works that looked like big abstractions along the lines of de Kooning or early Joan Mitchell, except that up close her curvy lines on white fields were swarms of penile heads and bodies pulled and twisted like taffy. The tone was still comic, the manipulation of paint less ham-fisted, the hectoring gone. Allusions progressively waned as her wormy figures and sexually suggestive splatters and drips gave way to graceful somersaults of tremulous forms, purely abstract.

She had made a complete about-face, unlike almost any by an artist to have emerged in recent years. Now she was doing cheerful confetti splashes of red, yellow and blue, calligraphic pirouettes, sweeping curves and minor skirmishes of linear forms, mostly spare on big white canvases. It was as if she wanted to see how far she could push traditional abstraction before alienating her first audience. In terms of an approach this was not necessarily different from the button-pushing early work, except that she explained the change simply as a desire to paint. Times changed. She changed.

She is a solicitous woman who talks with a flat Midwestern accent, making jokes and telling herself while she works how awful she is. She is modest, shy, but not without backbone. She can seem distracted when she isn't.

She lives in Park Slope, Brooklyn, with her husband of nine years, Girard Fox (their relationship came as a happy relief after many abusive ones, she says), and with their 7-year-old daughter. Since January she has taken the subway to a new studio in an industrial area of Sunset Park, near Bay Ridge, beside the water. On the ground floor of the building a factory makes rat traps. The smell of artificial cherries, peanut butter and banana -- rat ambrosia -- wafts upstairs. Ms. Williams keeps the windows open and the fan going much of the time.

The view of the water is good if you crane your neck out the window. She likes the fact that there's nothing around to distract her, except an old grocery store across the street: a tiny, dark shop behind a barred metal door, with a few dusty shelves of packaged food.

She Works Alone

The studio is nondescript and efficient: a shoe box with brick and plaster walls and a clerestory to let in extra light. Paintings stacked against the walls, a few pieces of tattered furniture, a couple of overstuffed tables of paints and magazines and a paint-spattered radio create a mild impression of clutter. Colin Whitaker, a laconic assistant, shows up several afternoons a week to prepare canvases, something Ms. Williams's husband pitches in to do, too. Otherwise she works alone.

The canvases get eight or nine layers of gesso, then are sanded. Two or three layers of white acrylic are applied with rubber brushes and spatulas to achieve a smooth finish. The result is like firm, polished rubber, but the process is ridiculously elaborate, she admits, saying about it: "I'm almost inhibited because the canvases are so good and smooth. But being smooth, they are easier to erase." Her procedure involves making marks, then wiping away the ones she doesn't like: she puts something down, responds to it, then responds to that until for whatever combination of reasons she decides the work is finished. The result can't be foreseen, just guessed at beforehand and generally aimed toward.

Today Ms. Williams is facing a canvas 84 by 96 inches. "It's like working in an arena," she says about the scale. "It's fun and freeing, except to the extent that size implies importance, which makes me uptight." Her tools are large, round Japanese sable brushes; several jars of paint; a step ladder; two wood supports for the canvas, which leans against the wall; and rolls of Bounty Select-a-Size, which after trials and errors, she carefully explains, turns out to be the sine qua non of paper towels for wiping oil paint off canvas.

Her Favorite Artists

Her idea for this picture is to pour colors down the canvas, then pull differently colored paints through the pours with a brush. The drips and pours overlap, the colors blend. The first step is to prepare the first color, a blue. She tries a few different shades, settling on a kind of aqua.

Taped to the wall is a blue abstraction by Mary Heilmann, cut out from a magazine. Ms. Williams finds it pretty but not the right blue. More taped cutouts are around the studio. Besides Ms. Heilmann, her favorite artists at the moment include Paul Morrison, Sam Francis, Ingrid Calame, Lee Krasner, David Reed and Bernard Frize, whose paintings of checkerboard patterns and marbleized abstractions seem in some ways similar to what she is trying to do.

"I want to see works by artists who take art seriously," she says. "It's inspiring to be reminded that art matters and that you can be bold but also minimal. I especially want to see pictures that show me how simple an image can be."

De Kooning interests her, naturally, but "my whole thing is lines on a plane, while his were interacting lines on an integrated background," she says. "I like to think my lines just float, and if I could eliminate the background entirely, I would. I've thought of painting on glass, but glass makes the paint look cheesy. Rubber might be good, but it reacts poorly with turpentine."

Out comes a glass jar from a box of jars her mother gave her. She squeezes two oil paints, turquoise and titanium white, into the jar, adds alkyd then mixes with a plastic spoon. Then turpentine. More white. Mix. Turquoise. "Eew, repulsive," she says about the color.

Better-made store-bought oil paints have more pigment; cheaper ones aren't as smooth. They have filler, less pigment. Day-Glo, which comes as a powder, has to be ground up, which is extra work. These are good paints from tubes, but they take a lot of stirring anyway. "The pigments have to be squished into the alkyd," she says. "Then I add turpentine. The consistency is crucial of course. We want a certain slurpiness," to allow pouring and dripping without too much running.

Ten minutes go by. Twenty. An hour, and she is still stirring before starting on a second color. Maybe violet or magenta, she muses, then spots Day-Glo pink in a jar across the room, but the jar's nearly empty. "Rats," she says.

By the time she finishes mixing both colors -- the second, a kind of lizard green that includes a pigment called permanent lemon -- more than two hours have passed. The work might be boring, but she doesn't mind it. Much of an artist's life, like everyone's life, is occupied by some drudgery, except that for an artist it can be handiwork, and the payoff is more than compensatory.

"This will take the rest of the day," she predicts about the time she will require to complete the picture. She places the jars of paint and brushes on a footstool next to the canvas. She shoves her stepladder beside the left side of the canvas.

"Now don't be surprised if it's really ugly," she warns, then stops. "No one will want to buy this picture. It's too big." She gets down, wipes some dust off the canvas, frowns, then climbs the ladder again. Jar up, ready to pour. Stop. Up. Stop. Up.

And then a trickle of blue paint slithers down the canvas. She scrambles to place the jar below the canvas at just the point where it will catch the trickle, then takes her brush, dips it in the jar of green and drags the green through the blue, making four lines, unevenly mixing the two colors and creating a pattern like tangled branches around a slender tree.

She repeats this process: pour, brush. "No, no, no, that was bad," she says, but keeps going: now she's adding seven curving blue lines, parallel, each about two feet long, pulled quickly from the bottom right of the canvas, so that she has pours and swirls on the upper left and parallel lines on the lower right.

She steps away. Paper towels are unrolled. She wipes different areas of paint away. She could not use white paint to cover up unwanted marks even if, for some reason, she wanted to because white oil paint on acrylic turns yellow, and white acrylic covering up oil paint cracks.

"Sometimes it's just fun to paint, but if I don't think clearly first, it always comes out ugly." The desired process is "semiconscious attack, with constant editing," she says. "You're not supposed to see the editing when it's done, obviously."

Having wiped away much of what she first did, she picks up the two jars again and duplicates the drip-brush procedure on the far right: a blue stream then green lines dragged through it, the lines this time making tighter curlicues and hairpins. "Oh, that's beautiful. Now I want to erase everything I did before."

So she does, which takes a very long time. When she stops for the day, she has two colors mixed in jars, a single blue drip and a serpentine green line through it on the right side of the canvas, the remnant of a squiggle on the left, and a pile of crumpled paper towels.

Ms. Williams is 47, the second of four children from a suburb of Chicago called Olympia Fields. The playwright David Mamet, she recalls, dubbed it "New South Hell," but Ms. Williams describes it as "bland, a town from which no one goes to art school, but it's refreshingly pure in its way." Her father worked as office manager for a small newspaper, and her mother worked for the Army Corps of Engineers, preparing reports. In the mid-1970's Ms. Williams moved to Los Angeles to attend Cal Arts, graduated, then moved back and forth between New York and Chicago during the 1980's.

Crest of the Wave

"I got all seedy from too many parties, too much fun," she says about her life in New York then. "I had no control. So I went home, became unseedy and developed an inner life and also fell into a terrible depression. I got into Chicago artists and began painting and drawing people, then returned to New York, saw a Mike Kelley show at Metro Pictures and felt liberated."

Her first shows in SoHo in the late 80's sold nothing, but she was on the crest of the wave of political and conceptual art. "Then I got really dissed by critics. 'Whiny, self-indulgent, victim art,' they said." It's a quotation she remembers verbatim.

"I felt misunderstood. I thought of my art as funny and as social statements. I didn't see it as cathartic. I wasn't making up anything grosser than what had really happened to me. But after a while I got tired of the politics and the in-fighting. I wanted to play around with paint. I got interested in just doodling, and my work went through a really ugly patch for a while when I learned how to use oil paint.

"People who are not into painting and who liked my early stuff thought I was crazy. They pigeonholed me: you know, I was a compulsive woman, a naïve artist. They didn't want me to be something else. Like I couldn't think for myself. It was condescending."

A few days after she began this picture, there is now only a tiny blue speck on the left, and she has erased part of the curlicue green stroke on the right that she first said she liked so much. Today she adds more pours and drips, each addition creating a new problem to which she reacts with stares, scowls and occasional raised eyebrows to signal approval. With more and more crisscrossing lines, erasing will be increasingly difficult, then nearly impossible because erasing one line will mean erasing others that she wants to keep.

'It's Like a Puzzle'

"Before, my work was completely unspontaneous," she says. "I didn't even trust my hand to doodle on canvas. Then I met Elizabeth Murray, and she gave me confidence because she said I should just draw straight on canvas, that I could do it. I did. Eventually I wanted to use paint with the same comfort and competence I had with pencil and ink. Now it's like a puzzle doing these abstractions. You solve the puzzle you create."

To get started she loads a big brush with green and paints the wall next to the canvas. The fluidity of her line depends on the flexibility of her hand but more, she says, on the flexibility of her brain. "Actually, it's not my hand as much as it is just getting into the groove," she says.

Now she pours a stream of blue down the center of the picture, takes the green brush and twirls it through the stream, making a serpentine stroke. She is trying to invent new ways of turning the brush to avoid routine. More drips and strokes on the left appear until the overall effect, she notices, not unhappily, is like a carousel: long, thin lines, like poles, and then calligraphic lines curving around them, almost like stick figures.

"I'm tempted just to stop. I could say it is finished. Is it? I don't think so. How do I know?" She would like to step away to get perspective, but if she does, the paint will dry and be harder to tinker with. So as if to shake things up, she adds a jangling line near the middle, a thick, snaking graffito, very different from the previous marks, which smudges the center of the picture while creating an unintended counterpoint with a mark on the left.

The problem now is whether to exploit this effect, a felicity, or erase the smudge, which is discordant. "The compulsion is to keep playing around because you never know that the whole thing won't get better if you keep going."

She crosses the room and starts painting another canvas, making blue lines, like squirming worms, each about two feet long on the blank white surface. "That was just to loosen me up," she says. "When I'm in a groove, I can turn to a painting that I've been stuck on and finish it. I started painting those penile tips in a moment of anger, when I just flung the brush around and realized the lines looked like something naughty.

"Having a plan is good, but when you stop having a plan something good can happen, too. One door closes, another opens."

During the next two weeks the picture goes through many stages. Ms. Williams takes snapshots to record the evolution. There is an ebb and flow: additions then subtractions, the image built up then partly disassembled, but generally expanding. New colors are added: Day-Glo pink and orange. She spends several hours one morning preparing them.

"I want two colors that are part of each other, like the blue and green," she said. The first pink drip and orange squiggle don't work because the pink didn't mix enough with the orange, so she thins the orange. Orange drips and pink strokes mix better. She mentions that years ago she had a job correcting other artists' illustrations for textbooks: she would use bleach and water to erase what they did, then add what the publishers wanted. "I was supposed to make somebody in the picture look Chinese or remove udders from a cow." Her present art reminds her of that job, she says.

But it is not simply a matter of erasing mistakes and making corrections. It is an eyeballing process, which needs intuition if it is not to be chaotic and arbitrary.

"This hasn't turned out to be a fast painting," Ms. Williams says, laughing at her earlier remark. "But once in a while, when I'm working at night and really absorbed, it's like I can see the lines before I put them down, like they were already there. Everything goes quickly. Sometimes I wonder, is the work already there and I'm just trying to find it, or am I making it up as I go along?"

'Precious Little Bits'

A month after she started, the picture is done. Some parts she liked were erased. "You can get hung up on what Emily Dickinson called 'precious little bits,' things that you love but keep you back from resolving the whole," Ms. Williams says.

The composition is a bright, interlaced flurry of drips and lines -- more spattered and busier than first seemed to be the intent -- whose illusion of spontaneity belies the construction.

"De Kooning was a model for me in the sense that he always kept the whole composition in mind, which meant being brutal about cutting out details," Ms. Williams says. "I'm happy with the way this came out, even though it didn't come out the way I originally expected. I had certain goals at the beginning, but things happened in the process. They always do.

"I started with an idea about drips and contrasting strokes pulled from the drips, but it changed. Meanwhile, this got me started on other pictures." A half dozen of them, new ones, all just begun, now lean against the walls of the studio, waiting.

"One thing always leads to another," she adds. "You've just got to get started, which is the hardest part."

In the Studio With . . .

This article is part of a series about watching and listening to artists at work. Previous contributions can be found at The New York Times on the Web:

nytimes.com/arts

Making a Splash

Sue Williams's work is in the collections of the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Museum of Modern Art in Manhattan and the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington.

The 303 Gallery in Chelsea, which represents Ms. Williams in New York, said exhibitions of her work were scheduled at the Palm Beach Institute of Contemporary Art in Lake Worth, Fla., from March 16 through June 16, and at the Vienna Secession kunsthalle in the fall.