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ARTSEEN

SUE WILLIAMS

by Jessica Holmes

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In the early days of Sue Williams's career, her work frequently centered on male violence perpetrated on women. Vignettes of rape, sodomy, and battery pervaded her canvases, rendered in comic-book style with figures depicted in black and white, and incorporated text. Caustic humor was to be found in these memorable paintings, though due to the painful subject matter, it was often of a "laughing so you don't cry" variety. Williams's frankness about the violence she experienced in her own past compounded their wincing intimacy. These traumas were part of her story.

The graphic and text-heavy works eventually gave way to the addition of color, while the brutal action became suffused, less self-referential and more universal. Then, around the turn of the millennium, her work underwent yet another shift, becoming evermore nonrepresentational until figuration disappeared entirely. It seemed the early influence of the likes of Carolee Schneemann and Nancy Spero had yielded to Willem de Kooning and Joan Mitchell, before landing in the territory of Japanese calligraphy. Since the mid-2000s, Williams has retained her electric palette while also allowing figuration—albeit of the more abstracted variety—to creep back into her art. Political concerns have also reemerged in the past several years, but with a focus on more global, rather than personal, affairs.



Installation view: *Sue Williams*, 303 Gallery, New York, March 2 – April 14, 2017. © Sue Williams. Courtesy 303 Gallery, New York.

It's a dizzying array of variation, and Williams, who has exhibited at 303 Gallery since the early 1990s, seems attuned to this in her current show. Drawing on elements from different periods of her career, Williams attempts to unite them into a cohesive narrative in her most recent canvases. In *Time Line* (2017), for instance, eye-catching candy-store reds and baby blues eventually give way to smellier, more scatological guts. In one corner, an umbilical cord unfurls from the stomach of an arcing nude woman, a fish-like entity attached. To the figure's left, a childlike character dances obliviously. A large

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swath of red paint reveals trails of fingers marks, as if a blood-smeared hand has left its imprint. In *Chicken Leg in Yellow* (2017), a painting whose rhythm ebbs and flows like the crescendos and diminuendos of a musical score, Williams has incorporated a number of scratchy figures that harken back to her earlier comic-book style. A girl, almost at center, vomits a smear of brown paint, while above her another woman lies supine, seeming to lift a skirt up above her legs. Small clusters of houses—markers of domesticity—dot the canvas here and there, including one grouping from which protrude what appear to be two lanes, one marked “stem,” the other “stalk,” a reference to the brain. From this cluster of houses also trails another umbilical cord, attached to which is an erect penis. Seasoned viewers of Williams’s work will likely nod at these references to her older paintings, but newer audiences may be left perplexed by the sheer amount of equivocal information contained in each canvas.

What remains clearer is Williams’s knack for making shrewd use of space. In *All Roads Lead to Langley* (2016), much of the action of the paint is contained to the upper half of the painting, and then again further relegated to its left-hand side. A chaotic tangle of blues—swirls of powder, cerulean, and teal—are punctuated by a large, softly brushed square of orangey apricot. The mass teeters on a two-legged “stand,” painted in brown just beneath. The lower left hand corner of the rectangle is left unpainted, and the resulting off-centeredness creates a tension that unbalances the viewer in a palpable way.

But the question of why that tension exists—and certainly it persists throughout the works on view—is less clear. With such a variety of references to the past, Williams seems to be thinking about time: time elapsed, and the trajectory of her work across the decades. But what emerges from those thoughts is ambiguous. The paintings are a draft of the artist’s memoir, still as yet unfinished.