

REGEN PROJECTS

Princenthal, Nancy. "Sue Williams." Art in America (December 2010)

Art in America

NEW YORK SUE WILLIAMS

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This 20-year-plus survey of Sue Williams's career suggested, rather forcefully, that her early work has been misunderstood. Curated by the artist Nate Lowman (who was 10 when the show's earliest work was made), the exhibition highlighted Williams's sexy humor and, even more vividly, her very deft hand. In addition to seven tightly installed walls of paintings and drawings, many of the smaller ones ganged in groups—and some hung on highly patterned wallpaper of two kinds, one commercial, the other designed by the artist—there were four sculptures, not the medium for which Williams is known. The principle that seems to have guided the selection overall was demonstrating that Williams never looked for pity, even when she was making paintings about getting beaten up without mercy.

Witness the examples of early paintings on view, among them *Dessert* (1990), a sketchy rendering of a lout slapping a pony-tailed sweater girl and calling her a stupid cunt (the words are written next to his mouth); she's serving him a plate of steaming turds and seems ready to give as good as she gets. *Eggs* (1992) is a convex oval canvas on which are written, in paint, a very funny few words of caution about men and their private parts. *Reprehensible Victim Art* (1994-2010), which was shown on the floor, is a silicon face squashed nearly flat by an implicit grinding foot; though its title drips irony, it could also be read as an

off-message barb about how readily, even smugly, victims are condemned, in the art world like everywhere else. (This piece was gone on a second visit.)

In any case, all that is long over in Williams's work. By the middle '90s, the funky black-and-white canvases of tragicomic sexual combat (back then, they were called abject) had given way to sprightly little figures engaged in all manner of erotic gratification and consensual abasement. These in turn yielded to near abstractions in which inner turmoil is represented by linear arabesques that catch feet and skirts, fingers and balls in their graceful web: wild tapestries of polymorphous cheer.

At roughly the turn of the millennium, the paintings reached a point of total abstraction, represented here by a glaringly white canvas down which slink half-a-dozen lazy strokes of very-late-de-Kooningesque pink, orange and blue paint. But Williams's canvases soon heated up again, in near-psychedelic compositions featuring various digestive, respiratory and sexual organs; in these, the presiding spirit seems to be Peter Saul. Other discernible sources range from Mike Kelley to Sean Landers.

Some further conclusions this presentation suggested: Visual overload is to be welcomed; art doesn't really call for clear thinking, least of all about politics, sexual or otherwise. (Witness the show's title, "Al-Qaeda is the CIA.") And sure, bad stuff happens, but good painting is what counts.

Inarguably, there was very good painting aplenty to be seen. There was also an abundance of dangling propositions.

—Nancy Princenthal