

REGEN PROJECTS

Hudson, Suzanne. "Sue Williams." *Artforum* (December 2005)

ARTFORUM

REVIEWS

NEW YORK

SUE WILLIAMS

303 GALLERY

In 2000, the *New Yorker* congratulated Sue Williams on her metamorphosis from "the angriest woman in the art world" to a "sort of blissed-out innocent," a feminist turned formalist (as if these terms were mutually exclusive) who nonetheless was still resigned to playing "Ginger Rogers" to Willem de Kooning's "Fred Astaire." Now, five years later, such insidiously sycophantic gender politics are all but displaced, even if it is hard to see Williams's recent work apart from her earlier agitprop exercises in aggressive desublimation. But perhaps that's the point. Here as elsewhere, Williams's work challenges easy circumscription—as style, as ideology, as teleology, and as rhetoric—and likewise refuses neat definition. Her apocalyptic wallpaper renders power, whether patriarchal or otherwise, potently visceral, productively slipping the noose of absolutist readings with each gummy convolution of line.

Yet at 303 Gallery, Williams's new large-scale canvases also offer a different sort of object lesson, one based less on contentious ambiguities of victimization than on overtly tendentious mockery. With titles like *Springtime for the RNC*, *newamerican century.org*, and *Because We Care* (all works 2005), Williams's antipathy toward our

current political climate and the reprehensible agents responsible for it is finally unequivocal. Holding the front gallery with their phantasmagoric dreamscapes, cartoon-laden biomorphism, and biting radioactive color, such works enact a slow burn, by turns optical and conceptual.

Springtime for the RNC evidences, according to the press release, "flowery pink anal orifices expanding and contracting in the breeze" splayed across a surface of citrus green, while *newamericancentury.org* displays chalky intestinal forms rimmed in blood red against a periwinkle ground, a manifesto of all-American grotesquerie. And then there is the wonderfully discordant *Because We Care*, a pink-on-pink valentine replete with all manner of cavities and protrusions dangling and interpenetrating across its frenetic field. Equally choleric is *Bindweed and Red*, a densely populated expanse of appendages in gnawing chartreuse that perceptibly warps ambient light with its volatile fluorescence. (It helps to know that while certain species of bindweed often have attractive flowers, it can also strangle other, more desirable growth.)

In the back gallery, Williams continued her playfully relentless assault with a suite of smaller ink drawings. *Gnarly*, *Orange Grove*, *The Blue One*, and *Bouncy*, works in purple, orange, blue, and black, respectively, adopted the paintings' anal-erotic forms, but reduced them to a more intimate and affecting scale. The linear tracery familiar from the paintings here takes over, becoming a teeming scrawl. Graphic sinews dovetail and fan back out, producing weirdly cosmic—and unforgivingly vulgar—passages in which concave forms are either rectums or black (or acid-orange) holes.

In the drawings, then, there is a smirking jocularly that remains unfixed in referential association. These smart-ass doodles are bawdy in their own way, and unlike the paintings, with their more explicit titles, they are harder to pin down. Here Williams has come full circle, but with a difference. These works are neither didactic nor elusive, but jokes as Freud once conceived of them: psychoanalysis in reverse. They might not be a talking cure for our social ills, much less compensations for Williams's prior flight from political engagement—if indeed that was what it even was—but they are small ruptures, moments of release and undoing. In times like these, it's nice to know that someone still has an unconscious worthy of inhibition—and also a conscience, too.

—Suzanne Hudson