

Grimley, Alex: "Williams, William T.," in Beyer, Andreas / Savoy, Bénédicte / Tegethoff, Wolf (Eds.), *Allgemeines Künstlerlexikon: die Bildenden Künstler aller Zeiten und Völker*, publication forthcoming.

1.1

Williams, William T, American painter, printmaker, *17.7.1947 Cross Creek/NC, lives and works in New York/NY and CT.

1.2

1962-66 Pratt Institute; 1965 Skowhegan School; 1966-68 Yale University, MFA; 1987 John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship; 2017 Skowhegan Governor's Award; 2017 National Academician, National Academy Museum; 2018 Pratt Institute Legends Award

An abstract artist from the start, Williams has nevertheless used his work to engage in its broader social and cultural context through the foundation of public institutions and art projects. Immediately following his graduation from Yale, he was a founding member of Smokehouse Associates (active 1968-70), an artists' collective that executed large-scale abstract murals on city walls in Harlem. In 1968, he was included in the inaugural exhibition of the Studio Museum in Harlem; that year, he proposed and subsequently organized the Museum's artist-in-residence program, which continues to this day.

His earliest series of paintings is comprised of sharp, angular, interlocking hard-edged forms, typically frames, spears, and arches painted in brilliant colors, as in *Sweets Crane* of 1969 (Albany, Empire State Plaza). His first solo show, at New York's Reese Palley Gallery in 1971, was met with immediate success: every painting was sold. Later that year he began teaching art at Brooklyn College, where he remained until 2008. The *Shimmer* paintings of the early '70s still consist of hard-edged forms but have a muted palette; their rhythmically patterned brushwork was inspired by Williams's experience of the rippling lakes of rural Maine, where he taught at the Skowhegan School's summer residency throughout the 1970s. *Skowhegan I* (1973, Hartford, Wadsworth Atheneum) is typical of this series, with palette of hues close in tone and value.

In 1975, Williams was invited to work at the Printmaking Workshop in New York by founder Robert Blackburn. He would continue making editions and unique hand-colored prints at each stage in his career. In the later '70s, he developed a repetitive, hieroglyphic style of markmaking, as in *Union Jack* (1978, New York, Michael Rosenfeld Gallery). In 1977, he participated in the Second World Festival of Black Arts in Lagos, the largest cultural event ever held on the African continent. Around this time, he began bisecting or dividing his canvases into areas of contrasting palettes and marks, with surfaces increasingly textural and painterly.

Handprints figure prominently in his paintings of the mid-1980s; from each handprint in *Crossroads* (1984, New York, Michael Rosenfeld Gallery) a trail of thickly-poured paint follows. The paintings of the *III½* series (c.1989-c.2017) are divided into a quilt-like pattern of small rectilinear areas of bright, fiery colors. The characteristic paint surface of these works is cracked and molten, with a top layer of simmering color splitting apart to reveal contrasting colors underneath. Throughout this series, cool hues like green and blue are imbued with unusual heat and intensity, as in *The Flute Player* (1992, Detroit, Institute of Arts) and *Deacon's Day* (1999,

College Park, David C. Driskell Center). Williams's *Blue Line* paintings of the 2000s feature calligraphic drawing that resembles musical notation and instruments. His *465* series of the later 2010s continues from the earlier *III½* paintings, with an expanded palette of muted colors and further variations in surface texture.

Williams's work has primarily been discussed and exhibited in the context of African-American art; however, the developments and innovations of his work fit squarely within the broader context of post-war American abstraction, and his contributions make him one of its best exemplars.

2.1 Work

Brooklyn, Museum. Columbia/SC, Museum of Art. Houston, Menil Collection. New Haven, Yale University Art Gallery. New York, Museum of Modern Art; Studio Museum in Harlem; Whitney Museum of American Art. Philadelphia, Museum of Art. Newark, Museum. St. Louis, Museum of Art. Washington/DC, Library of Congress; National Gallery of Art; Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture.

2.3 Exhibitions

Solo

1985 Winston-Salem/NC, Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art (*cat.*)

1991 Montclair/NJ, Montclair Art Museum (*cat.*)

1992 Harlem, Studio Museum (*cat.*)

2010 College Park/MD, David C. Driskell Center (*cat.*)

2017 (*cat.*), '19 (*cat.*) New York, Michael Rosenfeld Gallery

Group

1969, '72 New York/NY, Whitney Biennial

1971 Houston/TX, The Deluxe Show (*cat.*)

1986 Washington/DC, Choosing

1999 Andover/NH, To Conserve a Legacy (*cat.*)

2006 New York/NY, Energy/Experimentation (*cat.*)

2014 Brooklyn/NY, Witness (*cat.*)

2017 New York/NY, Smokehouse

2.4 Bibliography

D. Shapiro, *Art News* 70:1971(2)50-52; 85-86

A. Kingsley, *Arts Magazine* 55:1981(6)54-55

V. Mercer, *American Visions* 6:1991(2)14-19

V. Burden, *NC Museum of Art Preview* 1994(Summer)10-11; 15-16

Interviews with the artist in Michael Rosenfeld Gallery 2017 and '19

Oral history with the artist by Mona Hadler, *BOMB* magazine, online, Feb 2018