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Art in America

The Sum of Its Parts: An Interview with Sue Williams

by Carly Gaebe



Sue Williams: *The Serpent*, 2013, oil and acrylic on canvas, 54 by 64 inches. Courtesy 303 Gallery, New York.

Vibrant pops of Pepto-Bismol pink, tangy orange, cerulean blue and grass green streak across the six new large-scale paintings in Sue Williams's exhibition "WTC, WWII, Couch Size" at New York's 303 Gallery (Jan. 16-Feb. 22), her first exhibition since 2010.

Raised in 1960s Chicago on a steady diet of gleefully lewd Zap Comix, Williams often mixes grim subjects with hidden messages, witty juxtapositions and the inescapable humor of bodily functions. Her new paintings weave together abstracted imagery of the Twin Towers with guts and gonads careening through space, sometimes mashed together in a sticky embrace. The exhibition's title also contrasts the prospect of World War III with a decorator's lingo for the large size of the artwork.

Williams spoke with *A.i.A.* at the gallery about the World Trade Center, her favorite body parts and how to make a good painting.

CARLY GAEBE How did this new body of work start?

SUE WILLIAMS The paintings in the show were all made in the past year. Sometimes they were a struggle, which can make them interesting. Some paintings seemed to make themselves. I used to try to be persuasive in my early work about domestic violence. There was a time when the paintings had words and I wanted to express clear ideas and now I've gotten kind of arty. The paintings go where they want to go.

GAEBE The paintings in "WTC, WWII, Couch Size" show architectural remnants of the World Trade Center, sometimes

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appearing as swooping, elongated parallel lines or as twin buildings seemingly disjointed from earth. Why do you keep revisiting the Twin Towers?

WILLIAMS The Twin Towers are in every painting. I don't mean to focus on the past, or a particular event. It's one of those compelling things, like the body, that is endlessly of interest. For me, it symbolizes what I want to say about the current state of events because of everything that unrolled after Sept. 11. It's becoming more of a fascist world.

GAEBE The titles of your work—*The Ministry of Hate* or *Philip Zelikow, Historian*, for example—are often biting commentary on the political climate and the War on Terror. How do you want your titles to influence perception of your paintings?

WILLIAMS I want to draw attention to issues; I want people to be informed. It's a scary time. Everything gets integrated into the art, not always consciously. [The paintings] become a refuge. If I have visibility, I have the responsibility to try and change things.

GAEBE How does one of your paintings go from idea to finished artwork?

WILLIAMS No sketching or planning. Sometimes I have an idea like, 'I'm only going to use big brushes, I'm going to be really sweeping. I'm going to stand up and be really manly, and I'm not going to erase.' Sometimes I want to be big, sometimes I want to be tiny. Sometimes I'll get a nice color that's the right consistency and I'll start putting it everywhere. If it looks too nice, I may have to be a little destructive and wreck stuff. You just have to mess around until a painting comes out.

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These paintings seem to be liberated. They ended up being more about painting, even though they just seem like goofy parts pulled together. A painting is done when I like it. That's the hardest thing: to be happy with your work.

GAEBE Body parts, normally hidden away under the folds of trousers or warmly concealed inside a gut, are a recurring motif in your work. What are some of your favorite body parts to incorporate into your paintings?

WILLIAMS They're pretty goofy. I paint whatever hits me as amusing or attractive. It's really about boys, isn't it? There's a giant kangaroo with an erection. There's a bomb. There's a lot penises, a lot of chicken feet and birds, legs and toes. There's a little anus on parade. There's Truck Nuts. A couple of them have hairdos. And there's a labia. I used to be all fussy, now I can scrape something off and I can leave it. I don't have to be tidy; I can let things happen.
