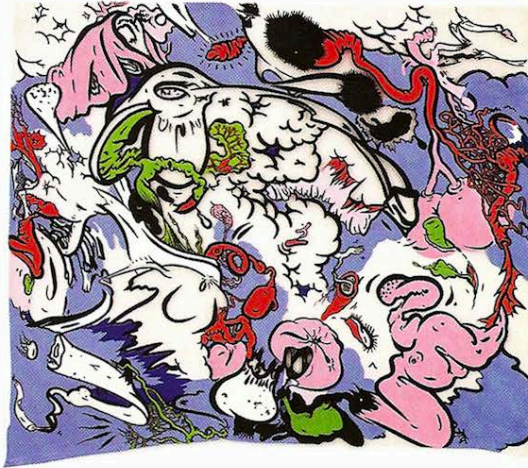


REGEN PROJECTS

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ART PAPERS



SUE WILLIAMS NEW YORK

Whether it critiques social mores or focuses on paint's purely sensuous qualities, Sue Williams' art has remained rooted in figuration. Her newest paintings, featured in *Sue Williams: Project for the New American Century*, fuse her early image-and-text scatologies with her more recent overtly lyrical abstractions. They present polemically titled panoramas of the human body distorted, flayed, and blown apart—a bloody iconography seemingly resulting from many visits to abattoirs [David Zwirner; September 11—October 25, 2008]. Practically, though, Williams has found a way to reconcile the opposing strands in her work—retinal patterning almost as obsessive as Yayoi Kusama's and moralizing outrage every bit as dyspeptic as Peter Saul's. The result is a parade of body parts and splayed innards tattooed like a scrim across her canvases.

Williams' all-over approach does not emulate the splatter of Pollock's exclamatory paint fling. Instead, her imagery translates the disorienting aftermath of a bomb explosion into welters of line ironed and starched into a crisply edged stencil. Viewed from a distance, her paintings flatten figure-ground distinctions into abstract, overall patterns. Closer, they reveal a manically detailed inspection of the many weak points of the human body, outlined in hues so intense that they lend the surrounding white canvas an ambient glow. The dynamic tensions of Williams' dyspeptic survey of the sorrier sides of contemporary American life are framed by tonal opposites, with white canvas jousting with a single color that serves as a substitute for black. This grisaille-on-steroids approach works well in individual paintings, but becomes repetitive given Williams' relentless use of red in four of the exhibition's seven large works.

Red backstops paintings whose dissonant titles cast a wide net of references, from commerce (*Cole-Haan*, 2008, and *Market Logic*, 2008) to philosophy (*Leo Strauss Theoretician*, 2008) and Williams' longstanding hot topic, sexism (*Some Ass*, 2009). A quick scan of the gallery conveys a pinkish hue hovering between flesh and blood. Intimations of morbidity are only reinforced

by the parade of scattered teeth, severed fingers, splattered viscera, and splintered limbs, interrupted only occasionally by bits of consumer flotsam. *Market Logic* depicts an ecosystem of spurting orifices and oozing cavities; the gorefest that Williams diagrams in *Leo Strauss Theoretician* crystallizes the endgame of neocon ideology as succinctly as any of Nietzsche's original writings about the relative achievement potentials of homunculi and supermen.

High key color illustrates dichotomies in some of the best works of *Project for the New American Century*. *Two Parties*, 2008, redefines America's political system in terms of Pepto-Bismo pink and tangerine orange. The patriotic red, white, and blue palette of *American Enterprise*, 2008, evokes Stephen Colbert's eagle-eyed parody of such conservative icons as the titular Washington, D.C. think-tank. Here, Williams adds minute filigrees to simultaneously suggest capillary blood vessels and the dissolution of red and blue state parity into a series of micro-targeted squabbles.

Five smaller framed and hand-painted works on acetate are both more personal and more calligraphic. Here, Williams uses the white of the museum board backstop as her white, contrasting it with black outlines that evoke the dark fantasy stylings of comic book artists such as Charles Burns and Gary Panter. In *I-800-Empire*, 2008, areas of modulated color—blues, greens, and yellows—juice the inevitable shrieking reds and pinks that are Williams' visual equivalent of a Greek chorus, while black-outlined white suggests bits of bone, sinew, and bodily fluid. With works like *Schools and Hospitals*, 2008, or *Happy Meals, The Next Day*, 2008, I found myself staring at potent mind bombs. Beautifully expressing the ubiquity of ideology and its too-often toxic aftereffects, the splenetic content of Williams' paintings lurks covertly, like a computer virus, beneath a seductive veneer of visual hyperactivity.

—Christopher French