

# HYPERALLERGIC

## There Is Nothing United About the United States or the Art World

Peter Williams doesn't make things easy for the viewer, and why should he?

John Yau [February 29, 2020](#)



Peter Williams, "Detroit" (2019), oil-based enamel, oil, and graphite on canvas, 48 x 48 inches (courtesy the artist and Luis De Jesus Los Angeles)

LOUISVILLE, Kentucky — Peter Williams is a painter who paints both abstractly and figuratively, with a jaunty, cake frosting palette as the main connection between the two approaches.

I first saw his work in the 2002 Whitney Biennial (March 7–May 26, 2002), curated by Lawrence R. Rinder, Chrissie Iles, Christian Paul, and Debra Singer. Williams was one of a group of artists living in Detroit that was included in the exhibition. The response by New York critics was frosty, at best. This was the opening paragraph of Roberta Smith’s review in *The New York Times* (March 31 2002):



Peter Williams, “#137” (2017), oil and pencil on canvas, 60 x 66 inches (courtesy the artist and Luis De Jesus Los Angeles)

What little good can be said about the 2002 Whitney Biennial has been said. It has been called noble, eclectic, generous and inclusive — not inaccurate characterizations from certain angles. But the latest version of this major showcase of American art is also bleak, pious, naïve, monotonous, isolated and isolating.

It is not surprising, I suppose, that being included in the Whitney Biennial nearly 20 years ago did not help Williams find representation by a New York gallery, or prevent that relationship, when he found it, from being short lived — just as it didn't help Melvin Edwards when he had a solo show at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1970 and installed four barbed wire pieces, making clear that art and politics were for him inseparable.

Williams's backstory is complicated in a different way. There is his biography, which includes a horrific automobile accident when he was a young man; his engagement with high American modernism, such as the works of Frank Stella and Jasper Johns, as well as formal devices like the grid.

There are his abstract paintings; his imaginative and dreamlike figurative works; and his engagement with Black history, which he sees as one of slavery, segregation, and incarceration from the beginning to the present. He has also responded to current events, including Black Lives Matter and the deaths of unarmed black men, women, and children. As these currents run through his art, the emphasis changes from work to work.

Add to this the fact that he seems to have at his disposal a number of styles and ways of applying paint, and it becomes apparent that there is something irreducible about Williams's work. He does not want his identity as a Black artist to be synonymous with his choice of subject matter in a way that the art world is used to.

He is not purely abstract, like Odili Donald Odita, nor is he purely figurative, like Henry Taylor. Add to this a scabrous sense of humor, and it is clear that Williams does not want to make anything easy for the viewer, and why should he? Preaching to the choir is not his thing. This is

the real power of Williams's work: he wears his feelings, fears, worries, and affections on his sleeve.



Peter Williams, "Jailbirds Rock" (2019), oil on canvas, 48 x 48 inches (courtesy the artist and Luis De Jesus Los Angeles)

In the exhibition Peter Williams: Incarceration at the Cressman Center for Visual Arts, Louisville, Kentucky (February 7–March 21, 2020), curated by Chris Reitz, the focus is on incarceration; as a Black man and a painter who feels entrapped in modernism's legacy of the



There is a big difference between the works in this exhibition and those in the most recent show I saw, Peter Williams: With So Little To Be Sure Of at CUE (February 23–March 29, 2008), curated by Larry Ossei-Mensah. In the Cue show, which I reviewed, Williams tended to situate the figures in a simple spatial dimension, mixing solid forms with mosaic-like shapes of color. One exception was an oil on canvas, “Mine”(2017), which is also included in the current show at the Cressman Center for Visual Arts.

“Mine” (2017) features a partially cropped swastika in the form of intersecting brown pipes, overlaying a star whose five points span nearly the painting’s entire surface. A corn cob protrudes from the top pipe, while a brown phallic shape emerges from the one at the bottom, topped by a feathery purple tassel that you might wear to a party.

In the upper left corner, on a white ground outside the border of the star, we read the following phrases: “RAP(E) CULTURE,” “LONG LIVE HIP HOP,” and “RECONSTRUCTION.” Just below it, in another area of white ground, are the words “BLACK POWER” and “CIVIL RIGHTS.”

Within the star, which is divided into four sections by the swastika, surrounded by blue stippled stars in a red stippled ground, we read “WHY ARE WHY ARE” above the horizontal pipe, and “WHITE PEOPLE SO ANGRY” below. There are caricatured heads floating across the surface, as well as many more phrases (“voter suppression”), names (“Tupac Shakur”), and questions (“Why did you shoot me?”).

While a viewer could read “Mine” as divisive, I don’t think it is that simple. That is to say, the painting is divisive, but it is much more than that. We read “HONKY,” “CRACKER,” “WHITEY,” and “PECKERWOOD” in one clearly demarcated area, and “WHOSE CULTURE” in another. It is as if various tensions within our current racial situation are given voice. After all, what are we to make of the phrase, “LOW-TECH LYNCHING” or “NEGRO” next to “NIGGA”? Who is speaking and who is being spoken for?



Peter Williams, “My Culture is Yer Freight” (2019), oil-based enamel, oil, and pencil on canvas, 60 x 72 inches (courtesy the artist and Luis De Jesus Los Angeles)

I don't think Williams is trying to convey a particular point of view so much as open a space where the viewer might reflect upon fraught, at times violent encounters in which no resolution is in sight.

In the painting “My Culture is Yer Freight” (2019), one of the many high points of this extensive exhibition, Williams uses a tan-colored band to outline a six-sided hexagon, which he overlays with an uneven grid of red, yellow, and blue, along with oblong rectangles divided by gray horizontal bands. If the grid is considered one culmination in the history of painting, and the so-called progress from figuration to abstraction, Williams offers another view. Within the

demarcated area, set against an uneven grid of dots and stippling, Williams has depicted various figures holding or wearing African masks. The dots and stippling evoke scarification and nails driven into Kongo figures.

By overlaying the grid with African imagery, Williams can be said to reverse history, suggesting that the spiritual force animating his figures is still alive. The way he varies the density of the dots — from rectangles filled with a single color to fluctuating patterns abutting each other — represent Williams at his painterly best.

At the bottom of the hexagon, he has painted a slice of watermelon, echoing the location of the slice of melon in Pablo Picasso's "Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J.)" (1911), the first picture in which Picasso incorporated African masks into his work. Williams's engagement with modernism and postwar American art is multi-layered



Peter Williams, "Petite Incarceration I – III" (2019), oil-based enamel, oil, and graphite on canvas; each: 36 x 24 inches (photo by Chris Reitz, courtesy the artist and Luis De Jesus Los Angeles)

It occurred to me that in placing a hexagon over the grid, Williams might be taking issue with African American abstract artists, such as Odita and Stanley Whitney. One of Williams' issues is

how, as an artist, can you insert (or assert) yourself into this chapter of postwar art history, which is largely determined by the white establishment art world. Is any acceptance of a Black artist really just another form of tokenism?

Williams addresses the feeling of entrapment mentioned above in three paintings collectively titled “Petite Incarceration” and numbered (all dated 2019). In each painting, Williams depicts a brown figure entrapped in an open modernist structure that is related to Sol LeWitt’s “Incomplete Open Cubes.” Is this what it means to be an artist of color working in paint?

Williams is a Black artist in his mid-60s who has neither a signature style nor a signature subject, but who remains woefully overlooked. You have to wonder: what is everybody so afraid of? Or is the goal to make it simple, easy, and palatable – to assimilate?