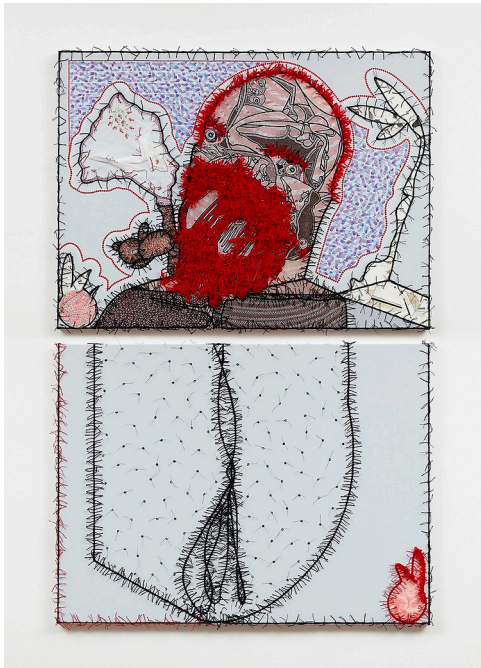


# Frieze

## The Tender Refuge of Franklin Williams's Woven Self-Portraits

At Parker Gallery, Los Angeles, the 80-year-old 'professor emeritus' presents new works as dazzling and personal as ever

Juliana Halpert | January 2020



Franklin Williams, *Professor Emeritus and His Teddy Bear*, 2019, acrylic and collage on canvas, yarn, crochet thread, sewing thread, beads and handkerchief, diptych, 1.5 × 1 m. Courtesy: the artist and Parker Gallery, Los Angeles

In the 1970s, while male artists on the East Coast of the US painted hard lines and forged metal boxes, and their counterparts out West moved earth and maneuvered light, Franklin Williams was hiding out in rural Petaluma, California, crouching over his impossibly intricate, beautifully crafted paintings and sculptures, covering them with tiny painted dots, buttons, beads, quilted paper grids and delicate stitches of string. In 1964, Williams took a stab at abstract expressionism as an undergraduate at California College of Arts and Crafts (now California College of the Arts), until visiting professor John Coplans noticed the tiny, patterned drawings that Williams had been doing on the side. 'This is who you are,' the esteemed art critic insisted. 'Be who you are.' Coplans strapped all of the young student's paintings to the top of his Volvo and drove him to the San Francisco Bay Bridge, where the pair tossed them over the edge.

Since then, Williams has been no one other than himself. The artist steers clear of discourse: he does not read art magazines and avoids gallery openings. He had not stepped foot in a museum until he was 27, when his work appeared in the historic 1967 'Funk Art' exhibition at the University of California, Berkeley. Williams's work has long been associated with funk art and its even quirkier cousin nut art, two Northern California movements of the 1960s and '70s,

though their irreverent pictorial gags starkly contrast with his commitment to crafting something closer to the heart. The artist draws most of his influences from his extended family: his mother and grandmother, who taught him an array of American handicrafts, and an eccentric uncle, who created exquisite wood carvings and sculptures as a pastime. They encouraged young Williams's artmaking partially in response to his inability to read or write. (Williams struggled with dyslexia, which had not yet been diagnosed.) Art became – and remains – a personal refuge, deeply tied to feelings of familial love.

Tender tributes to William's childhood abound in 'The Inimitable Professor Emeritus,' his show of ten new mixed-media paintings at Parker Gallery, an outpost of Bay Area sensibilities that occupies an elegant Tudor style mansion a stone's throw from Griffith Park. Three of his mother's embroidered handkerchiefs have been sewn into corners of the canvases. A wooden Welsh lovespoon, nodding to Williams's heritage, dangles from a black ribbon affixed to the top of a painting. Old drawings have been cut up and collaged. His characteristic techniques are wielded with the kind of mastery and verve that an artist only finds after a lifetime of practice. Surfaces are blanketed with intricate patterns of painted dots, shaggy knots of crochet thread, sewn-on seashells, beads and buttons. Their uncanny likeness to quilted fabric sometimes fools the eye.

Williams's designs often form geometric, mandala-like abstractions, finding their expressive power in trance-like repetition. But these newer works fixate on more anthropomorphic forms, marking the artist's first major foray into portraiture. Circular eyes and mouths float, agog, inside the wobbly, amoeba-like outlines of human heads and shoulders. The figures feel freshly formed, embryonic, highly permeable; their wide, wonky gazes seem to peer into the world for the first time. Two paintings feature 'Professor Emeritus' – Williams's new title, now that he's retired from his alma mater, where he taught from 1969 to 2018 – who appears noticeably older, sporting a beard of bushy red yarn. They are tactile, touching self-portraits: we see a wizened Williams in his one public role, built from the same stuff of his earliest influences. In *Professor Emeritus and His Teddy Bear* (2019), his eyes fix at a distance, as if pondering the many young pupils whose lives he has undoubtedly shaped.