

FABRIK

Parker Gallery – Franklin Williams: 1963-1973

By Peter Frank | January 2018



Franklin Williams emerged in the early 1960s with the burgeoning Funk movement in northern California, exercising astounding technique on whatever materials and formats he essayed. The results are as beautiful, peculiar and even hilarious now as they were a half-century ago. There's an intricate sensibility at work here, bolstered crucially by the craftsman's hand but not dependent on it, manifesting a world of constant metamorphosis.

Williams became a fixture on the Bay Area scene in the early-to-mid 1960s, but never a prominent (much less self-promoting) one. He exhibited often, but was almost bashful about doing so—one of the reasons he has remained an artist's artist and a talent barely recognized beyond San Francisco until today. Another reason, it seems, is that Funk travels well only in disguise; its rambunctious imagery sells itself abroad (as the success of Robert Arneson and William T. Wiley attests), but its gaudy maximalism and high production values don't. Worse, Williams is an intimist, even a miniaturist, a still small voice in an age of stentorian clamor.

The exhibition of Williams' early work was divided into three parts: objects from the mid-late '60s, paintings from the early '70s and, upstairs, a clutch of drawings from 1965. All three groupings shared Williams' hallmark exactitude and an abstract-organic formal vocabulary. The objects—small, eccentric assemblages indebted to surrealism without being surrealist—sat on their shelves and pedestals like old-fashioned stand-up comedians: witty, worried, forlorn, confident and unpredictable all at once. The drawings, all 12 x 9 inches, introduced linear and, indeed, pictorial complexity into the earlier objects' gnarled contours and textures, and held the wall, terse and tender, like embodied haiku. The paintings revealed Williams as a lavish colorist and a master of patterning, symmetry and kinesis bordering on the psyche-delic. In all these works shapes and presences seem in constant flux, almost impossible to describe even as Williams himself has limned them with masterful precision.