HYPERALLERGIC

The Intimate Abstractions of Franklin Williams, an Unsung Master from the ’60s

Franklin Williams’s work is the kind that challenges a viewer and demands the labor of self-reflection to resist knee-jerk reactions.

Clayton Schuster | 30 August 2017

Franklin Williams, “Divine Punishment” (1977) (all images courtesy the author for Hyperallergic)

Franklin Williams, “Blue Moment” (1972)

SANTA ROSA, Calif. — In 1963 Franklin Williams was under the tutelage of John Coplans, the famed art critic and photographer. Both were in their formative years. Williams was in the midst of matriculating at the California College of Arts and Crafts (now the California College of the Arts). Coplans was a guest lecturer at CCAC, still a decade away from taking the reins of Artforum. CCAC at the time was split between the two great factions of mid-century Bay Area art making: figuration and Abstract Expressionism. Williams idly experimented with the latter as his classes required, painting big abstractions that were lackluster. Absent was a connection between him and the art. Coplans sparked a major shift for the young painter when he discovered some pieces Williams never intended his teachers or classmates to see –– abstractions, but far more intimate than either his own work to that point or what anyone else around him was making.

These smaller pieces proved to Coplans that classroom instruction focusing on form over content had lead Williams astray. He believed that these smaller pieces which Williams had kept hidden away heralded a new creative direction for the fledgling artist. To make his point clear, Coplans demolished one of Williams’s larger Abstract Expressionist paintings over a chair. The pair then tied the remainder atop Coplans’s Volvo and drove to the middle of the Bay Bridge and threw it over into the churning tide. The following day, Williams returned to his empty studio and began anew.

Six decades later, *Eye Fruit* displays the result of this new beginning — that is, the life's work of an unsung master. The first section of the show is devoted to Williams's early work, which includes his quilted paintings and stuffed sculptures. In "Four Red Hearts" (1973), we see the kind of art that earned him a nod from critics in the Pattern and Decoration crowd (although connections between Williams and any such movement are, at best, facile). Four stuffed hearts seem to grow out of plants unfurling from each of the corners. Among these is a field of canvas pillows stuffed with cotton and painted over with what read as patches of grass on top of a variety of jumbo-sized protozoa. Tassels of yarn mark several of the pillows and cover each heart.

"Four Red Hearts" reveals many of the elements recurrent throughout Williams's oeuvre. The work as a whole evokes a garden overrun by neglect and vermin. The stems bearing the flowers are strong, almost phallic against the soft, supple curves of the hearts. The protozoa in the pillow field might be feeding on the apparent grass, or are perhaps repulsed by it and desire to forage elsewhere. Growth and decay, creation and cessation, waxing and waning, the cosmic drama of redshift and blueshift interact and unfold without succumbing to the idea of a zero sum existence. Williams's work doesn't debase itself with the qualifications of winners and losers. To commune with his art is to bask in higher truths.

Inseparable dualities continue to crop up throughout the show. In "Golden Grid" (1966), the linear order of a latticed square with the golden threads of an attached carpet of yarn, vomit out a tumorous appendage whose chaotic presence impugns and is impugned by the grid's stiffness. In "Blue Moment" (1972), a quilted apron depicts two scenes featuring some sort of man-made structure surrounded by a scene of trees, ferns, fish, and more protozoa. At the center of the scene towards the left is a gateway on a hill which leads to a monument or perhaps a tomb crowned by a black sun emitting inky droplets of irradiated energy. On the right, the gateway tumbles down the hill and the monument floats above the sun. Between these scenes is a vulvar opening, which reads as something like the creative aspect of the universe. The surrounding trees and fish and protozoa seem indifferent to whether the gate and monument are fixed or fleeing. Read as a narrative, the destruction of these structures is at once catastrophic and inconsequential. The flora and fauna go on living, their environment changed but their instinct to survive intact.

Franklin Williams, "Eye Fruit" (1982)

Franklin Williams, "Four Red Hearts" (1973)

Franklin Williams, "Golden Grid" (1966)

Installation view of Eye Fruit: The Art of Franklin Williams

With such big ideas in play, it seems unlikely that any two people will enjoy the same viewing experience. Williams makes difficult art, the kind that challenges a viewer and demands the labor of self-reflection to resist whatever knee-jerk reaction it might induce. Trying to categorize this artist or his art is impossible. Art historical taxonomies are too narrow for him. The show manages to provide as clear a view of the arc to his career that such a small space will allow. If anything, *Eye Fruit* proves we need more shows and informed discourse about Franklin Williams.

Eye Fruit: The Art of Franklin Williams continues at the Art Museum of Sonoma County (425 7th Street, Santa Rosa, CA 95401) through September 3.