

Frieze

It's Repulsive to Look at the News': Sue Williams Discusses Her New Paintings

On view at Skarstedt's London gallery, US artist Sue Williams's latest body of work reflects a battle against 'hating everything'

BY HETTIE JUDAH 23 OCT 2018



Sue Williams, *Portrait Gallery*, 2018, oil on canvas, 1.8 x 2 m. Courtesy: Skarstedt, London © Sue Williams, 303 Gallery, New York

There's creepy stuff taking place within the tangle of US artist Sue Williams's paintings: bodily functions unleashed, violent threat, gaping orifices, smells, horses behaving oddly, and bad sex; though much of it is cached within a private image vocabulary. From her nightmarish picture-book paintings of the early 1990s through later works of that decade that read, superficially, as abstract patterns composed of cartoon forms, politics, gender and sexual violence have remained important underlying themes. Williams has worked up-close on her latest series, on squarish canvases that she progressively rotates as the work proceeds. Perspective is splayed and vertiginous, darting between little clusters of buildings picked out with a fine brush, lakes of oozing colour, birds, butt holes, little girls, soft furnishings and uncooked poultry. Sets of parallel lines abstracted from the Twin Towers loop between it all like a persistent nightmare. I met with Williams in Skarstedt's London gallery where she walked me through the eleven new paintings that make up her solo show there.

Hettie Judah *Your paintings from the late 1990s were very clean and cartoonish - almost abstract. Your work has been on quite a journey since then, hasn't it?*

Sue Williams They were looking very abstract for a while and it didn't seem to go with what I was thinking. I was doing a lot of anti-war protesting, so I started painting stuff about the war, cutting it down to its essence. Then I got really fed up with it. Also, in 2012 Mike Kelley, my favourite artist, died -



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I liked him so much because he seemed to be able to do whatever he wanted, he was so free - and I just thought, 'I hate everything.' Also the hypocrisy of the manipulated stock exchange, and the people buying the work as investments and then just feeling, like, 'Urgh, why bother?' Anyway, I started making obnoxious paintings: whatever I wanted, really obnoxious stuff. And then this fun way of painting emerged where I do whatever I want. So, they are different, they are mindless in a way.

HJ *How much have you blocked out all the hideousness going on in the US political scene and how much have you allowed it to seep in when you're working?*

SW There used to be more alternative media. Now we can't really trust any of the media or the internet. I mean, there's still good stuff, like in Canada. I think everyone knows that all the goofy, stupid, obnoxious things that Trump does are a real distraction. They take up all the media stuff. Like Noam Chomsky was saying: things are changing really fast. I thought that was very scary. [She points to a painting in which a pool of violet circles a five-sided form] This painting here is called *All Quiet* (all works 2018) and this is the Pentagon. We don't know what's going on over there. I don't trust the news or the media. I just see bits and pieces. I have an overall idea of what's going on but not the day to day stuff. It's repulsive to look at the news.

HJ *There are lots of objects creeping around with birds' feet in these new paintings, and birds seem to be a repeated motif in the work, in both their raw or cooked states.*

SW They are. *Founding Father Orbiting* was actually going to be called 'Chicken Holiday'. I have to say, I have a parrot - it's my daughter's - and it has really the most obnoxious screech. They did tell us after we bought it, and of course she couldn't take him with her to college or her apartment. I don't know why chicken feet: I think it has to do with lines.

HJ *This big blue arrangement of lines in Founding Father Orbiting looks a bit like a bird's foot too, but it also looks like a flower or a pubis.*

SW It's the Twin Towers. Yes, we have, unfortunately, Twin Towers everywhere. I started doing them around 2008 and I guess they're just the embodiment of, well, the horror. And then everything followed fast. I guess that's why they keep showing up. Also, I never did straight lines before.

HJ *In the US, the home is synonymous with the idea of 'safe place' - you've got homeland security - but home is a really unsafe place for a lot of people.*

SW For a lot of people it's a nightmare. That's what my therapist said to my husband: 'Her childhood was a nightmare.' It's hard, because that's all you know: you know something's off, but you don't really know how off. It's funny, sometimes I think people that don't have secure homes, they think about homes the most, maybe?

HJ *Do you think in terms of colours or combinations of colours having, say, a masculine or feminine association, or even natural and artificial? There are some works here full of browns and muted greens that feel organic, and then elsewhere use use what feel like deliberately artificial elements: super-hot and very bright colours.*

SW Well, I guess I think, 'What would look nice next to this? Oh, I've done so much brown, I'm going to do some colour,' so I'm thinking about the painting mostly. I've tried to get away from pastel colours: maybe they're kind of girly. I would say this [*Village Swirl*] is a pretty one because it's pleasant,



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but it's not supposed to be. It has a men's room with excrement [in it]. I like to use more brown. Especially if I'm starting a painting, I can really do whatever I want, you know. I don't have to worry. And then I might think 'Oh god, it's horrible' later. Sometimes its really fun, with a big brush and loose. Then, other times, especially when I start, I'm feeling insecure so I try stuff.



Sue Williams, *Passing Past*, 2018, oil on canvas, 1.8 x 2 m.
Courtesy: Skarstedt, London © Sue Williams, 303 Gallery, New York

HJ *You used the word insecure. Do you approach an empty canvas and get nervous about it?*

SW No, I'm kind of excited about it. I become nervous later when some parts look horrible. It's kind of an insecure situation because you don't know what's going to happen but you keep working on it until you like it. Or you can rip it off. So there's always that.

HJ *How much thought do you give to composition?*

SW That has to be a conscious part. It's like a puzzle and you have to pull it together. Sometimes it falls together but sometimes it just wants something. I have to set them aside and then come back. Then I just have to keep working on it. If you come in like, 'I have to finish this!' it looks really bogus.

