

## PRESS RELEASE

Michael Williams  
Frogs 1 – 9

June 3 – July 23, 2022  
Opening on Thursday, June 2, 6 – 9 pm  
Lichtenfelsgasse 5, A-1010 Vienna

Galerie Eva Presenhuber is delighted to present *Frogs 1 – 9*, the gallery's fourth solo exhibition with the American artist Michael Williams. *Frogs 1 – 9* is Williams' first solo exhibition in Austria.

In past bodies of work, Michael Williams has developed a suite of interconnected paintings out of a drawing, not uncommonly focused on a human figure or surrogate. In the case of *Frogs 1 – 9*, the source is *Untitled (Frog)* (2019–2020): a small sheet given over to a greying man-cum-jester, hollowed nostrils shaped like an electrical outlet and mouth agape, forming an unlikely heart. There, in his domestic sanctum, he dons a bell-tipped fool's hat—historically, the triangular protrusions recapitulated asses' ears—and gaudy checkered sweater. His thumb and middle finger pinch a splayed frog that stares back at its reciprocally confounded wide-eyed captor. The tone is jocular as befits its comic protagonist. But it also recalls the morality play of Puritan theology, as exemplified by Jonathan Edwards' sermon equating the precarity of human life to that of a spider dangling over a fire (a none too subtle analogy for the proximity of Hell). The jester and frog reappear in related sketches suggesting defeat—*Untitled (Wipeout)* (2022) literally spells this out—and the cap 'n' bells transmogrifies into a fleshy body atop a gold-rimmed plate in *Untitled (Mar-A-Lago)* (2022), a perfectly horrible cannibalistic feast.

However vivid these images are, or references acute, they are attenuated in Williams' paintings. The present context helps to disambiguate them, keeping the drawings close to their spawn as though to see how far the organizing genealogy might go, but Williams never offers the prize of correlation. Instead, as is customary for his method, Williams has taken the primary composition and, through lacerating it, turns it into a segmented field, which he then repopulates with broad swathes of color. Beginning in 2010, he started photocopying drawings and contouring puzzle pieces across them before cutting out those sections to further warp as well as newly constitute the picture. A single-authored version of an exquisite corpse, each of these pieces is full of seeming non-sequiturs, contiguous but willfully non-integrated information, that still baits us with the possibility of resolution. (The floppy hat prongs survive in *Frogs 8*.) In their migration from diminutive paper to canvas—a transfer of scale as well as media—the drawings become an alibi for formal invention; as well, they offer frameworks for thinking more abstractly about the relationships between parts and the pressure each exerts on the whole. The Puzzle Paintings generate a structure, and maintain, alongside whatever nominal content might still be harbored, process as one enduring subject.

While Williams has made ample use of printed paintings since 2012—composing entirely in Photoshop with a digital drawing pad and stylus, producing flattened inkjet prints (some of which he has hybridized, printing and then painting over them)—these paintings, all made in 2022, are oil on canvas. Each is vertical, thus oriented like an amped-up portrait, coming in at a decidedly oversized 172.5 x 132 cm (68 x 52 in). Taken together, they intimate an animism that they do not represent. Instead, they physicalize, even pictorialize, the act of making, showing decisions made and strokes accumulated. Some marks, geometries, or whole areas are covered over but not wholly obliterated with each pass, in what becomes a densely as well as thickly layered surface. Looking at the paintings long enough reveals a dominant hue, emergent despite the visual cacophony. (*Frogs 5*, for one, reads emerald green.) Still, exaggerated palettes are consistent across the grouping: so much mint and carnation pink, lapis and auburn, a washed-out orange verging on peach and candy-apple red. There are also recurring instances of orbs—displaced or reinterpreted eyes, human or amphibian?—and a churning pinwheel.

Williams is especially good at wrangling visual aspects together, reminding us that all composition involves the recombination and arrangement of elements. In this, he is unapologetically meta, performing endlessly the combinatorial logic of jigsaw shapes seeking not the consolation of return to a prior order but the basis for a kind of disunified synthesis. But the story doesn't end there. Wry rejoinders to a genre of studio fable, these are allegories of making; they are also overtures to looking and to imagining the latter through the former. However well they reproduce, however smoothly they travel, Williams' recent paintings are imposing, tactile things. Not quite murals, I cannot but help regard them as billboards or beacons, soliciting and maybe interpolating us. In this, Williams models it from the first, in that man and frog forever poised in the shock of mutual recognition.

Suzanne Hudson

# **GALERIE EVA PRESENHUBER**

Michael Williams was born in 1978 in Doylestown, PA, US. He has been the subject of numerous major solo and groups exhibitions at institutions including Kunstmuseum St. Gallen, Lokremise, St. Gallen, CH; Le Consortium, Dijon, FR; The Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, PA, US; Brant Foundation, Greenwich, CT, US; Rubell Family Collection, Miami, FL, US; Musée des Beaux-Arts de Montreal, Montreal, CA; Secession, Vienna, AT; the Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY, US; Dallas Museum of Art, Dallas, TX, US; Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, OH, US; Ballroom Marfa, TX, US; and the Garage Center for Contemporary Culture, Moscow, RU.

For further information, please contact Katharina Zimmer (k.zimmer@presenhuber.com).

For press images and information, please contact Naomi Chassé (n.chasse@presenhuber.com).