

PRESS RELEASE

Sue Williams

September 1 – October 28, 2023

Opening on Friday, September 1, 11 am – 8 pm, and Saturday, September 2, 11 am – 6 pm

Waldmannstrasse, Waldmannstr. 6, CH-8001, Zurich

Galerie Eva Presenhuber is pleased to present its seventh solo exhibition with the US-American artist Sue Williams.

"The artist is a suspect; anyone can question him, arrest him and drag him before the court; all his words, all his works can be used against him," wrote the philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre in his essay on Masson. The time, when artists in the West were suspected of creating works that tore apart the dense web of prevailing norms, when they went beyond what was considered morally reprehensible or, nowadays, politically incorrect, seems to have largely passed. Today, anything goes, and provocation is just a likely means of attracting media attention to eventually be absorbed into the all-defusing mainstream.

But there are exceptions, such as Sue Williams. Born in Chicago Heights in 1954, she studied at CalArts in the 1970s, and now lives in Brooklyn, New York. She is not a self-proclaimed provocateur who indulges in subversion, even if she used to spontaneously, almost timorously, utter phrases like "the art world can suck my proverbial dick." Rather, she is an artist committed to honesty and to herself, who has taken every liberty to say what others either consider unspeakable or consciously or unconsciously close their eyes to. Her visual world is far more than an artistic coming to terms with trauma and no less than a revolt against state injustice, which she had to experience after brutal acts of male violence and sexual abuse. Artistically tapping into the sources of her anger, she causes irritation, if not shock, in those who try to keep anything offensive under wraps.

Looking at the trajectory of Williams' oeuvre, one cannot help but notice the shame- and boundless gaze of her early work, where she used cartoons to express issues that were usually kept quiet in public. Yes, she felt "an obligation and responsibility to inform people about the reality of sexual abuse and domestic violence and the laws that do not take rape seriously and keep women from being able to arrest their partners for domestic violence. Even if only in galleries and hopefully museums." Later on she becomes more abstract, but "how could a figurative artist ever do abstraction? When they become totally abstract and about basic paint painting itself, it ends in the same color circles." Thus she made a conscious decision: "I wanted to bring back some form of the figure because I realized that my art was not about what I was passionate about in the world – the wars," says Williams, who took part in the Vietnam War protest of 1970 and then again about Desert Storm, Afghanistan, and Iraq ad nauseam.

As in de Kooning's work, Williams interweaves dissected figuration with an abundance of autonomous lines and zones of colour. In the process, abstract and figurative are so combined, interwoven and intermingled that we find it difficult to qualitatively differentiate between the two. Nowhere are they linked in terms of content. Whether naked bodies, genitals, animals, body parts, orifices, symbolic organs, plants, everyday objects or amorphous forms, everything is distributed on a pale monochrome ground in such a way that these elements seem to float on the raw canvas – before us lies an unmanageable *allover* to be discovered. The art of finding one's way through it must be learned. If only because the pictures are not engraved with a predefined visual path that we viewers can follow. Our eyes can throw themselves into the turmoil of various forms and outlined scenes both here and there and start the journey into the unknown from wherever. They can move from right to left or from bottom to top, from left to right or from top to bottom. Thus, the movement they perform appears to us as a pure effect of our whim and has not the slightest thing to do with what the emptiness of the canvas is filled with.

But what does this *allover* mean? It sometimes seems as if the meaning of the figurative signs is melted by the fact that they are barely distinguishable from the abstract forms, the colored blobs and spots. The collective ensemble, in which nothing has priority and everything has equal validity, turns out to be a juxtaposition held together only by rhythms and energies. Williams says: "My style slowly morphs and now may have explicit figures, a bit of them – or

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just paint! They are planned in advance and then become a puzzle to try and turn into a painting. I've chosen to paint in a way that is always new to me, messy with a kind of ugly criteria for beauty, whatever that means!" And so, no matter how we twist and turn things, we recognize that they elude any interpretative access. As a result, we, the viewers, are forced to fish the legible signifiers out of the turbulence and swirls of this allover, as if from an infinite sea.

Heinz Norbert Jocks

Sue Williams was born 1954 in Chicago Heights, IL, US, and lives in Brooklyn, New York, US. Her work is represented in major museums and private collections worldwide, including the Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY, US; Hirschhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington D.C., US; and Sammlung Goetz, Munich, DE. Major Museum group shows include *Momentum*, Voorlinden Museum and Gardens, Wassenaar, NL (2020); *MANIFESTA 12*, Palermo, IT (2018); *Animal Farm*, The Brant Foundation Art Study Center, Greenwich, CT, US (2017); *Don't Look Back: The 1990s at MOCA*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, CA, US (2016); *Painting 2.0*, Museum Brandhorst, Munich, DE (2015-16); *America is Hard to See*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY, US (2015); *Take it or leave it*, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, CA, US (2014); *Figuring Color*, The Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, MA, US (2012); and *Keeping it Real*, Whitechapel Gallery, London, UK (2010).

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