

ARTslant

BEARING WITNESS, PETER WILLIAMS ADVANCES AN ART HISTORY OF ACCOUNTABILITY

BY BRADLEY RUBENSTEIN
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Although I have known Peter Williams for decades, and have written about his work in the past, we had never sat down and done a proper interview—it’s been more of a 30-year-long conversation. Recently, however, I wanted to get down his thoughts on several of his latest bodies of work: urgent paintings that are at once timely and have

art historical resonance. His inclusion in the November group exhibition *As Carriers of Flesh*, at David & Schweitzer, saw the artist confronting Whiteness and police brutality against black men and women in colorful canvases that unite history, biography, and allegory. There seems hardly a better moment to unpack Williams’ unflinching confrontations with his subjects, his deep sense of political satire, and his optimism that paint can somehow make a difference and hold us all accountable.

Bradley Rubenstein: When we talked last fall I thought we would discuss your work somewhat chronologically, but things have changed a lot since then, which seems to have impacted your work a great deal. Let’s start with your new work.

Peter Williams: The new work has come as I’ve done my “research”: from short blurbs on Facebook, knowledge of some of these events from the press, and books that I’ve read throughout the years. I am humbled by my lack of firsthand experience recently in the lives of black folks, except through the press. Life in Delaware is also humbling since I live in a Republican-lite environment. My Blackness affects how I live, but not how I survive. During the past three years the rise of anti-Obama hatred and the Alt-Right movement has begun to unfold in ways no one could have conceived, except for those we conceived as a radical Left—Dick Gregory, Farrakhan, Angela Davis, etc., to name but a few.

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The incarceration of millions of young black men and women in market-rate prisons as virtual slave labor; the killing by police of this same group of young people; the exposed hatred of people of color by the white community is stressing me out. The only forum I have is through my art and my voice, and neither seems to be reaching very many people. The recent work at David & Schweitzer has allowed me to put some of the more controversial images into play.

I had received, by accident, some large canvases because of a mistake in the order I got from the art supplier. I saw this as an opportunity to explore the deaths of several young people whose lives were soiled by press reports: Sandra Bland, Tamir Rice, Michael Brown, Trayvon Martin. Several of these paintings were shown. The exploitation by the police of the lives of these individuals, except Trayvon Martin, gave weight to my belief that we are in another period: a race war, pure and simply put.



I feel that people need to come to grips with what is really happening. The Left has been very passive in this regard. We need a resurgence of the Black Panthers to awaken the community. I also feel the need to try to evolve the work and confront my audience with my feelings. One painting is called *Honey*, and it's about the consumption and cannibalism of black folks by Whiteness. The more I research the more horrified I am of the realities we are going to face as Whiteness defines the future for us.

BR: The recent Guston show at Hauser & Wirth struck me as relevant too—important for Guston’s handling of the subject matter, but, also, I think he created a form of painterly political satire. Guston found in Nixon a subject really worthy of the amount of work he did. I see something of that happening in your paintings, definitely with your show at Novella: *Common & Proper Nouns: The N-Word* (2015).

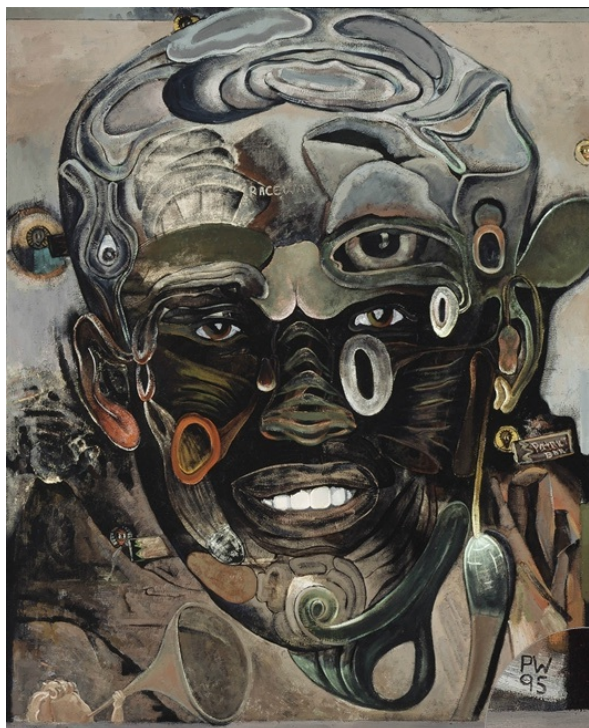
PW: In the Novella show I’m responding to the realities of having to inform and negotiate with my audience a platform that allows for the development of a character (or characters). It was the first time that my passion spilled out into a manifest character, the “N-Word.” His creation has been years in the making and may reflect such influences as Richard Pryor and his comedy routine about this: “Up in the sky, it’s a bird, a plane, a piece of coal, a crow, no it’s SuperNigga.”

Often, times like this are influenced by many things including comics. But this work is superseded by the recording of the deaths, which have become a common occurrence since the advent of camera phones. One has only to reflect upon Rodney King and the image of such brutal strength of the “state.” Or the horror of a man being choked to death by the police as he pleads for his life. These are the vile tactics of the powerful overlooking the raw lack of humanity. I am moved, baby.

BR: I’ve known you now going on 30 years, so for me it’s hard to pick from various periods in your painting to talk about in depth. You did some very great paintings while in Detroit, and I’ve written about the one at the DIA before...

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PW: The painting at the Detroit Institute of Arts, *Portrait of Christopher D. Fisher, Fourth Reich Skinhead*, is from a body of works on perpetrators of hate crimes in the early 90s. Young black men

had gone to the wrong side of the tracks and were beaten to death by marauding white youths, primarily in New York. The piece in the DIA is the largest of these works and an attempt to open up a discussion. It was originally hung in the Dutch galleries as part of an “interventions” show. It was meant to ask questions concerning the wealthy Dutch portraits and their relationship to the slave trade. In the middle of his forehead I wrote “race war,” which was considered a bit controversial at the time. Now it just seems prescient.

About this time I started to also make paintings about black stereotypes—Mammy, Sambo, etc. It was not well received in Detroit. I was considered to be trespassing over a part of history most black folks preferred not to be reminded of. I kept exploring this idea and tried to take more responsibility for the ideas inherent in such subject matter by exploring the subtle racist imagery using animals such as ducks—they

manifest as a stand-in for race with thick lips and bulging eyes—and cartoon characters such as Mickey Mouse and Heckle and Jeckle, which were overtly manifested with racist stereotypes.

That led me to the point where I really reformed my thoughts as a result of traveling abroad and seeing work manifested from its own history, in Europe—Paris, Berlin, and Madrid. Goya had a great impact on me. His horrors gave me permission to go where I needed to go.

BR: One thing that has held my continued attention with your work has been this need you have of connecting “art” and “reality,” engaging with the world through your work. I just finished this new biography of Joan Didion. I have considered her work influential with regard to my own writing, but the strangest thing happened while reading about her: after 30 years of only paying attention to her work, I was finding out how anti-Semitic, racist, and self-obsessed she was. I had previously thought her style of writing, in her journalism, came from a place of political satire. Then I find out that, for example, when she wrote about the SLA and Patricia Hearst, she identified with Randolph Hearst.

I mention this because I do want to talk about your biography a bit, but I also want to ask you if you feel that it is important to



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know about the artist's life when looking at their work. I am pretty sure that my question falls somewhere in the artspeak category of "identity politics," but I am thinking that there is something else there too.

PW: I imagine that biography is an important asset for any critic, writer, or intellectual. The "unexamined life" is a constant thing that I am aware of. I have always felt my art was a cathartic relationship to myself. I could not as a child make sense of my family, nor the outside world. It seemed to defy any kind of logic that I could come up with. Because of the toxic relationship I had with them, I felt compelled to understand all the repercussions. In effect, I saw my relationship to the outer world as one of constant confrontation.

I seemed not to understand the simplest of mechanisms, whether it was how a clock or time worked or even why my family wanted me to be aware of certain things. That education excluded how to deal or engage Whiteness. They would leave off the idea of Whiteness and white power and would expect me to understand. I was never given answers to the questions I had and often felt their rebuke. As I engaged the larger world, it seemed that all of these rebukes were personal rather than polemical. But now I see them as related to race and class, neither of which anyone ever explained to me.



It was in the abstractions of my earliest work that two things seemed to manifest: one was a kind of interest in the originality of what I made, and the other, that people/family seemed to have ideas about what the work was about. That frightened me because I had not established in my own mind a sense of what those images meant. It seemed that people held judgments about me, good or bad. In my family if there was a judgment, it was bad because I was operating outside of a norm, and it was politically incorrect. But outside my family, whites (namely, Jewish people) seemed to be enthusiastic about what they saw.

BR: In talking with other painters, I have often found that the strongest work comes from a place of pain—psychological, spiritual, or whatever.

PW: I often felt alienated from my community as I grew and identified with the Western tradition of image making, methods, and ideals. I was quite gifted as a young artist, and I was included in exhibitions beyond my family's understanding. I suspect they were proud but did not understand what it meant in relationship to me. I was hounded by the homosexual fear and idea that to be creative you were a "fag," which I didn't know about but scared me. My father thought I had communist leanings. (I suspect he was a marketplace capitalist.) I didn't play sports, and my brothers had a violent regard toward me. So there I was, out, and I didn't even know what that meant.



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I certainly felt a kind of empathy for all these attributes, even though I had no idea what they meant. I noticed in the images I made that people would remark as if they knew me, yet I was still discovering what those things meant. Abstraction was a language I could not conceive of, yet at times operated in. So I drifted to representation out of fear and desire to control what people saw—as if I could make them see me as I saw myself, a simple yet complex human being. I didn't understand all these feelings; nevertheless I was becoming the outsider. I was lucky to go into therapy at the age of 15. I found out that the darkness in my mind and work came from my family and their friends, who responded to their own understanding of who I was. I rejected them all, of course, because I was a survivor at heart.

As my work evolved, so did my sense of self and empathy for the underdog. I have always taken them in my heart and believe that I must bear witness to the events and poverty of their lives.

BR: I like that—the painter as witness to their time. It is a fact that your work will outlast you, yet your voice will still be heard.

PW: It is not my voice I feel the need to exercise but the voice of many, who remain nameless. Day in and day out they deal with, encounter, engage the horror of our current crisis. We seem to forget that the history of this country is of violating the civil rights of the “Other,” be they African-Americans, Mexicans, or indigenous people. There is no heaven, only the concept that Whiteness promotes controlling the natives, as they perceive us. The ideal of an afterlife is one of the great jokes played out through religion and Christian supremacy. We look for redemption for an act we never seem to escape, our “negritude” and/or “otherness.” My vision is of the history of art being able to tell the appalling story of humankind and the evils it perpetuates. Every now and then we seem to need a war or cleansing to sort things out. Why? Because we are all fallible, and the weak unfortunately are on the front lines of that battle.

It's my hope that people of color wake up and take up the battle from a safer awareness of this struggle and not go into the night unarmed or unprepared. I know I'm suggesting a horror—and I imagine it will be—however, I don't



know if it can be prevented. Maybe the West, Christians, white people, and the powerful will realize what a myth they live in. However, it would be a mistake to believe in such a possibility. We just elected a jackal, capable of unknown horrors. His demeanor is that of a sinner, the way he sits inward, self-aware of his demons. I can only imagine the kind of sickness he and his comrades are preparing for all of us.

Whiteness allows this horror to be played and must take responsibility—if only through my painting. Even worse, the planet is at stake, not just the survival of humankind, and that may take millions of years to repair, if at all. I can begin to see the links and the connections as one looks at the heart of evil deeds by evil men and women.

—Bradley Rubenstein