



The Beautiful Somewhere

The Art of Philemona Williamson

January 26 – April 24, 2017

The Robert and Sallie Brown Gallery and Museum



UNC

THE SONJA HAYNES STONE
CENTER FOR BLACK CULTURE
AND HISTORY



Philemona Williamson

Philemona Williamson, a native New Yorker, currently resides and works in Upper Montclair, New Jersey and has a studio in Bloomfield. Her paintings depict children and adolescents, which come from her imagination and some from her own childhood. Williamson's most popular medium is oil on linen.

Williamson received her bachelor's degree from Bennington College and her master's degree in painting from New York University. Among her awards are a Joan Mitchell Foundation grant, Pollock-Krasner Foundation grant and a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts.

Her work has been shown in many one-person and group exhibitions throughout the United States and abroad, including the IV Bienal Internacional de Pintura en Cuenca, Ecuador, in 1994. She is represented in numerous private and public collections, including The Mint Museum of Art, Charlotte, North Carolina; Hampton University Museum, VA; Sheldon Art Museum, University of Nebraska, Lincoln, NE; Mott-Warsh Art Collection, Flint, MI, and AT&T.

Williamson's commissions include *Seasons*, 18 fused-glass panels for the MTA's Art in Transit program at the Livonia Station in Brooklyn, and *Folktales from Around the World*, four glass mosaic murals for the New York City Board of Education at the Glen Oaks Campus School, Queens.

Ashé

IN THE ART OF PHILEMONA WILLIAMSON

by Arturo Lindsay, Guest Curator

The ashé – the life force – in the art of Philemona Williamson is palpable. It is aesthetically provocative and conceptually engaging. It is powerful, thought provoking and disarming.

The art of Philemona Williamson reveals the mark of an artist that is engaged with the issues of the day. In her work, Williamson focuses on the ways in which people of color and marginalized communities are impacted by current events. Williamson enters her studio to confront these issues by commenting on them in her paintings. Her studio is located in a Civil War era factory in East Orange, New Jersey. This historic structure has been converted into a community of artists' studios. A visit to Williamson's studio engenders a feeling of entering the artist's fantastic world. Dolls, toys, children's clothing, small sculptures, wallpaper and miniature furniture associated with children and adolescents neatly organized and strategically placed on shelves and on her "inspiration wall" create an environment that brings to life the enchanted world Williamson captures in her work.

Philemona Williamson was born in New York City into an African American family from the South and raised in the legendary River House, a 1931 Art Deco co-op apartment building, on the Upper East Side of Manhattan that is home to the rich and famous. Her parents worked as domestics in the home of a wealthy Greek family whose teenage daughters, Natalie and Cornelia, treated Williamson "...like a treasured little sister." Her mother was the housekeeper and her father was the family's chauffeur, cook as well as the gardener for the family's country homes in Magnolia, Massachusetts and Rye, New York. According to the artist, "My father was a country boy from Burlington, NC [that] left home at 13. He later joined the Navy as a cook and then moved to NYC. My Mom was born in Greenville, SC and went to school to become a dental assistant [then] came to NY where she briefly worked as a dental assistant. A friend encouraged her to become a nanny for a judge. This is where she would later meet my father."

Williamson claims that her childhood was full of "drama" while living with the Greek family. She writes, "My life there was all about drama. I listened to musicals and would act out all the parts with Natalie and Cornelia. We would make up plays together and tell wild stories – I was always treated as though I was not a child but a mini adult. I don't remember having toys, just pencils, crayons. Play was all about making up stories – and there was always whispering and intrigue."

Williamson's parents were very gentle people that were open to difference. She remarks, "I have no recollection of 'race talk' growing up. My parents



were very open minded." The artist attributes this open minded home environment that her parents created for her to be fundamental to her worldview ultimately fostering her interest in breaking stereotypes.

Reminiscing on her childhood and the significant presence of children in her work, Williamson writes, "I paint adolescents because that is the time I find most hopeful, tumultuous, exciting. And that is when I discovered painting. I was in an art class and realized I had no control over anything in my life – but I could control what I put on the paper, and where I put it."

My dad had been diagnosed with cancer and it was a secret. Just my Mom and I knew. She told me to never tell anyone. So art was my lifeline and it continues to this day to be the thing that fuels my soul."

Williamson's impressionable childhood and formative years among the privileged in Manhattan's Upper East, combined with weekend stays in a

residence hotel with a multi ethnic, working class mixture of single men, women and families, along with trips to their employer's country homes, visits to family in the rural South and finally moving to the Upper West Side when she was 11 years old has provided the artist with a rather unique platform from which to view the world.

As a result, she is able to reveal to us a mystical/magical world in her paintings. According to the artist, her methodology is based on a "three-layer technique."

The first layer is a metaphoric. In this layer, the artist uses adolescents as her primary subjects. However, these children do not signify childhood. Rather, they are signifiers of that short transitory period in our lives that is loaded with intense emotions. The kids in Williamson's paintings challenge us to recall those moments preceding adulthood that were open to fantasy, curiosity and innocent exploration of taboos. In her paintings Williamson questions everything – gender, race, class, etc. Further, she creates a virtual theatrical fourth wall in her paintings that at first glance separates the "audience" – her viewers – from the "performers" – her children. The unfolding scene in this imaginary two-dimensional theater provokes the viewer to pause and ask, "what's going on here?" That dramatic pause, or maybe hesitation, on the part of the viewer could be the result of hints of sexuality, vulnerability, androgyny and the gender bending challenges to societal norms that appear in the work.

In her 2008 painting *We Are All*, the facial expressions and gazes of the children create a tension on the "stage" where the action is taking place. It makes us wonder if something just happened that was unpleasant. The boy? – I am not sure of the gender of this child – on the right appears disheveled and discontent as he/she looks downward. The child on her/his immediate right seems concerned. One could surmise that it is the caring, maybe worried, look of a sister for her sibling that is in distress. The girl on the far left looks sympathetically into the face of the girl next to her who seems off-balanced standing on one foot. They appear to be holding hands. Finally, the girl in the middle standing firmly on both feet, wearing boots, holding a large grasshopper and at the focal point of the work has locked arms with two other girls and is engaging the eyes of the viewer with a rather defiant gaze. In so doing, she enters the space of the viewer thereby violating the "fourth wall" convention.

In many ways, the tension created in Williamson's work between the viewer and the children recalls the female nude's gaze engaging the viewer in Édouard Manet's seminal work *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe*. In both works it is obvious that we, the viewer, walked into a scene where an "inappropriate" activity might have taken place. The difference however, is that Manet's sexualized nude appears somewhat undisturbed by the intrusion while Williamson's girl appears to be rather defiant and ready to engage the intruder in battle.

This painting was inspired by an incident that occurred on March 18, 1997 in the small village of Nyange, Rwanda when a group of pro-Hutu youth militia intent on massacring Tutsi children cornered a group of Hutu and Tutsi students from St. Joseph's Secondary School and demanded that they separate themselves according to ethnic group. The militia was intent on killing Tutsi youths. The students locked arms and responded that there were not Hutu or Tutsi. They declared that they were all Rwandans.

Layer two is content based. The bees in Williamson's 2006 oil on linen painting, *A Patient Spirit*, recalls a story about her father that she only learned after his death. Williamson's dad took Ted "Teddy" Dracos, a cousin of the Greek girls, fishing when he was a boy. While they were cleaning fish they caught that day, a swarm of bees appeared. Young Teddy became agitated. Williamson's dad calmly told the boy to "...relax, they won't bother you, just be patient and continue to do your job." Years later Teddy honored Williamson's dad in his book when he wrote, "Many years before I started writing this book my mentors buoyed me, and it is they who I must thank first: James Williamson, who took the time to take a young boy fishing and in the process teach him through example about courage, discipline and caring."

According to Williamson, the appearance of fish and bees in this painting pays homage to her dad, James Williamson. The last layer – layer three – is grounded in form and process. At this layer we see the artist mastering her medium. Williamson claims, "I love to put a painting together ... I love to transform paint into these people." She enjoys the tactile feeling of applying paint to canvas and the results are evident. Her technique is very painterly.

The expressive quality of her brush strokes along with the rather hurried and seemingly unfinished manner of handling the application of paint invokes the presence of the artist at work. Her paintings are loaded with pentimentos



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— evidence of a previous work beneath the painting or marks the artist made on the canvas revealing something but not completing the thought. A case in point is *Invisible Run*, a 2015 oil on canvas painting of a young girl running towards the left side of the canvas. Between the girl's legs there is evidence sketches of a pair of legs and feet that was abandoned. Hanging from her left hand is a sketch of what appears to be the beginnings of a drawing of a doll. Williamson's technique of leaving unfinished sketches in her work reveals a sense of urgency.

The use of implied line plays a significant storytelling role in the artist's work. In many, if not all, of her paintings Williamson alludes to a narrative through the gazes of her children and their facial expressions. The direction they are looking, often from the corners of their eyes, forces the viewer to follow that line of sight to its destination. Very often the child that is being viewed is also looking at another or, off the canvas thereby introducing yet unknown/unseen character.

In her 2002 oil on linen painting *Gathering Prayer*, the girl in the upper right of the canvas is looking directly at the girl seated on what appears to be a small boat to the left side of the canvas. She is extending her right hand with what appears to be an offering. The seated girl however, with her leg raised, is gazing somewhere between the two girls or maybe off the canvas. Finally, the child to the lower right of the canvas holding a stuffed bunny, also in an offertory gesture, gazes off the canvas to the left. The gender of this child is rather ambiguous. However, the artist claims that it is a boy. Locating where the action is taking place adds to the mystery associated with Williamson's work. Where is this body of water? How come the child on the lower right has one leg submerged to just below her knee, but the right knee is sustained on what appears to be paper? The hole in the boat reveals water; does this mean that the boat does not have a bottom? These questions and more will keep a viewer engaged with this painting for years to come.

Scale is another basic element of art that also figures prominently in Williamson's work. The children in her paintings are enormous; most often their entire bodies are not able to populate the canvas. These crowded environments create an intimacy enjoyed only by the children in the paintings. According to Williamson, “they are in their own world, until someone (the viewer) interrupts them.” Similarly, in *A Patient Spirit*, discussed earlier in this essay, there is little canvas space for the sky or water to occupy given the enormity of the youngsters. Further, bees and fish also occupy a dominant space and are out of proportion to the other objects in the painting thereby vesting them with greater importance.

The collection of paintings gathered for this exhibition are transformative and affective, two important criteria for identifying ashé in works of art. The memory of the faces, the gazes, the melancholic expressions and the sexualized positions of the children are not soon forgotten. An experience with Williamson's work challenges the viewer to recall his or her own childhood and times of vulnerability. They might even provoke us into taking action to address the plight of vulnerable children today that are at risk of being trafficked into a life of prostitution, slavery, and child labor — a major concern for this artist.



The Beautiful Somewhere:

The Art of Philemona Williamson

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| 1. A Patient Spirit
Oil on linen • 48" x 60" | 4. Boundary Crossing
Oil on linen • 48" x 60" |
| 2. Yearning to Be
Oil on linen • 48" x 60" | 5. Sunday Picnic
Oil on linen • 48" x 60" |
| 3. Garden Gifts
Oil on linen • 48" x 60" | 6. Tender Breeze
Oil on linen • 48" x 60" |



About the Robert and Sallie Brown Gallery and Museum

The Robert and Sallie Brown Gallery and Museum at the Sonja Haynes Stone Center for Black Culture and History is dedicated to the enrichment of visual culture on campus and in the community. The Brown Gallery mission statement commits to: "... the critical examination of all dimensions of African-American and African diaspora cultures through formal exhibition of works of art, artifacts and material culture."

History and Overview of the Stone Center

The Sonja Haynes Stone Center for Black Culture and History is an integral part of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. As a Center within the Academic Affairs Division under the Provost's Office, we play a central role in supporting the academic mission of the University. We have a commitment to broaden the range of intellectual discourse about African Americans and to encourage a better understanding of the peoples of Africa and the African diaspora and their perspectives on important social and cultural issues.

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The UNIVERSITY of NORTH CAROLINA at CHAPEL HILL

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