

GLADSTONE GALLERY

BOMB

BOMB 116
Summer 2011

Art : Artists On Artists

Michael Williams by Steve DiBenedetto



Hippie, 2007, oil on canvas, 24 x 30 inches. Images courtesy of Canada.

The first painting I ever saw by Michael Williams was called *Hippie*. I was in Miami for the damn art fair where I had some work up in the year of the absolute worst economic climate—2008? As I was cruising around I saw this painting in Canada gallery's booth and went, What the hell is that? It was a depiction of a long-haired, grungy-looking guy seen from behind with a specifically rendered, exceedingly hairy arm holding a compact disc in which he's peering at his reflection. My first thought was, Okay, I mean, who hasn't done that? But to paint that situation and capture this combo of idiotic stoner moment and *2001: A Space Odyssey* (primitive man

GLADSTONE GALLERY

confronting the discovery of a mythic technological object) seemed really smart to me. Plus it was funny as hell. So what's going on here? The dude is looking at himself and thinking what? *I need a shave? Where have all the flowers gone? I don't know what this thing I'm holding is?* The list goes on. His surroundings are not well-defined, but maybe that big, streaky diagonal is a log on a beach strewn with colorful debris, like an artist's palette. Is he walking? Will he trip over the log in his narcissistic stupor? Did the plastic disc wash up onto the beach or did the guy bring it for enhanced contemplation?

One of the coolest things in the painting is how the spectral prismatic refraction of light on the surface of the disc is portrayed (as most of the painting is) with a concise, casual exactitude. There is a conflation at work here that is both comedic and profound: the natural, dirty, archaic world butted right up against the harsh, brittle, plastic world of the digital. The primitive meeting the virtual, the world of gravity absorbed into the world of the weightless photon. The first man meeting the latest device.



Shrimp, 70 × 54 inches, airbrush, colored pencil, and oil on canvas, 2011.

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Although Williams paints with a quirky, antic style, his tone of forensic detachment is surprising. He is not suggesting that hippies, clams, turtles, cats, or humanoid paintbrushes are any better or worse than the rest of us or have any answers that we can't find in the so-called advanced modern (modern) world.

In spite of Williams's neutrality, I want to believe that the hippie is confused in some way. He must be wondering, *What's the deal here?* And, is he looking at the disc or at himself? An academic deconstruction would argue that the very act of painting an image of the act of looking is in keeping with the traditions of the birth of modernism. Like Manet, but when he worked at *Mad* magazine. Scenes of looking are frequent in Williams's painting:

1. Guy snorkeling underwater looking at female glam fish.
2. Clam and lobster looking at computer screen.
3. Human soda bottle looking at reflection in full-length mirror.

A while back, at an artist dinner, someone remarked that the painter hosting the dinner was utterly fearless in his work. It got me thinking about how exactly one would define fearlessness in painting, especially at this point in time. I mean how dangerous is painting after all? Polke, supposedly using poison to paint with, comes to mind, or Fontana, slashing his way through painting. The question "Where is the edge to push painting to?" has become obsolete, but we've still got to do it. Or as Peter Doig says, "Painting is one of those things that if you thought about it too much you simply wouldn't do it." There might not be any "far-out" place for painting to go anymore. But there is the far-out-there that only you can do. Maybe the extreme is in the middle now, the imploding center, an energized, kind of neurotic, slacker shrug. Contradictions played out. What's courage here? How much disregard for convention can we actually handle?

GLADSTONE GALLERY



Jigsaw, 2009, oil on canvas, 64 x 96 inches.

As a painter, Michael Williams displays all the qualities I would describe as fearless. He is totally committed to a syntax of his own. Things gleefully don't add up neatly in his work. And he doesn't care if you have a problem with that. Radically dissimilar painting conditions coexist in every painting. One of my favorite things about going to Williams's studio is that it never remotely crosses my mind to think that anything in there could be done differently. An acute sense of his ownership of the work demands one to accept, like it or not, whatever state a work ends up in—from wild, utterly personal narratives to unruly psychic projections that are embedded in the paint as much as they slip across, and in and out of, the painting's physical surface.

These are not works for those who prize pictorial logic or reasonable resolution to the narratives and passages strewn upon the canvas. No, these are fully corrupted compositions that reek of personal DNA, unfiltered excursions into pararealms where, as much as anything goes, certain things do tend to pop up more often than not. Consider the tendency for animals or inert objects to take on the role of artist, or figure model, or web surfer. In *Studio*, Williams incorporated a turtle doing a non-objective rendition of a human subject. As you look at the painting you began to notice other animals also engaged in painting the figure, as if in art class. I immediately thought of some parable where the turtle represents painting as an essentially slow activity, not unlike in the work of Albert Oehlen who, early on, painted dinosaurs because, as he rationalized it, "Zay ahre old, like paahinting."

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Here's a sensibility committed to discovering new boundaries for painting. Williams has thoroughly freed himself from the constraints of professionalism and tasteful conformity. He is one of those artists out there who makes me feel like I better get to the studio. NOW!

— *Steve DiBenedetto is an artist living in New York City.*



Surf N' Turf 2, 2009, oil on canvas, 40 x 60 inches.



The Man Who Sees Everything, 2011, airbrush and oil on canvas, 69 x 54 inches.