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## IN THE STUDIO WITH MICHAEL WILLIAMS

BY ALEXANDRE STIPANOVICH | TUE. DECEMBER 17, 2013 | 12:00 AM | [IN THE STUDIO](#)

Prior to arriving in New York about twelve years ago, the artist Michael Williams lived in Providence, where he rolled with the cartoonist art collective Fort Thunder. Based out of a warehouse on the second floor of a pre-Civil War former textile factory in the city's Olneyville district, the live-work performance space was a creative epicenter in the late 1990s whose alums include Jim Drain and Mat Brinkman, among others. From there, Michael headed to St. Louis to study sculpture, but these days, what keeps him busy is painting. Michael's newer pieces, which mix oil paint, airbrushing, and digital drawing, propose dreamy versions of what catches his eye. My friend [Erika](#) and I visited his New York City studio to learn more about his technique and his imagination.

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**Can you tell us about *White Smurf*, the book you released as a supplement to the latest issue of *The Journal*? Are its drawings and images found?**

Nothing is found, actually. It's mostly drawings that I made on a computer and on paper,

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and there's one painting. It's a mix of things; I spent a lot of time trying to make things work nicely together.

## **Where did the title come from?**

"White Smurf" was a nickname that I gave my daughter Lettie when she was around 1, and I wrote it down as a possible title for something. Later, I started thinking of it as a concept separate from her—some sort of goofy alternate to a White Dwarf, which is the final state of a dying star.

## **Do you feel you are very connected to childhood imagery?**

Well, I don't really think about children's drawings that much. I like some children's drawings but it's not exactly what I'm interested in. Drawing for me has actually become a very chaotic thing. Mostly I draw in sketchbooks. I have tons of them going at once, and they're all over my house and studio. I bring them back and forth and sometimes I'll misplace one for months. When I find it again, it's as if I didn't make the drawings inside, and in that way I'm able to approach these images as an outsider and find a new context for them.

## **How do you come up with an idea for a painting? Is there a clear vision that comes to your mind all of a sudden, or is it more of a mosaic of thoughts?**

Well with the recent paintings, it's a pretty involved process. I make drawings in the computer with a pen and tablet, and then edit those. I upload them and e-mail them to my printer, at which point I have to wait a week or two, sometimes more. Then I go pick them up in my Subaru. When I get them back to the studio, I make a decision about what size stretcher they'll need to have, and then I wait again for those to be fabricated. Once I've stretched them, I'll sometimes paint on them a bit.

## **So the painting process is in two chapters?**

Yes. It's a strange feeling because I've robbed myself of the immediacy of painting. I realized that, in a way, I'm having an experience more like that of the viewer. You know, I may have made every mark that we see on the canvas, but in fact I didn't physically make those marks on that canvas. Just like everybody else, I'm just standing here looking at marks that were made by a printer. So there is this eerie experience with making these things. I'm having to learn new skills and new ways of judging my own paintings.

## **Who would you say your influences are? Paul Klee?**

No, not really. Lately I've been thinking about people like Joe Zucker, Malcolm Morley, Polke, and Albert Oehlen. I've also been looking at William S. Burroughs' paintings and collages recently, and a German painter from the 60's named Uwe Lausen. But most of the art I see is in books or on the Internet. In photographs of paintings, you only get the image—you don't get the surface. And I've begun to like it this way. I'm left to finish the story. I can imagine the surfaces of these paintings how I would like them to be— [they're] my dream version.

## **You also have a characteristic brushstroke that defined your "noodle" paintings.**

The first show of those paintings was called "*Straightforward as a Noodle*" and people started calling the works "*noodle paintings*", but I never intended for that. Anyway, those paintings were made with an airbrush and oil paint. In the back of my mind, I thought the airbrush would be a good tool to combine painting and drawing. Being able to paint with

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a brush that you don't need to be constantly reloading is a great way to just pour out my ideas in a very unfiltered way.

## **Would you say your paintings are humorous?**

I hope so. The connotations of using an airbrush are funny, in a way, because of the history of how and where the airbrush has been used. Like hot rods and temporary tattoos. And maybe drawing on a computer has similar kinds of bad connotations, but these are all encouraging things for me to try to paint my way through.

## **The titles of your works can be very funny as well. Is that a function of a painting for you, to alleviate the mood?**

Sometimes I think the painting might just be a place-holder for a poem.

## **Would you agree that the paintings give off a certain warmth and friendliness?**

Well, I've heard this come up before. When I'm making paintings, I'm not smiling and picking flowers in between brushstrokes. It's just a formal process for me. I'm trying to set up compositional, surface, and tension problems for myself that I have to solve. To make a painting that's compositionally balanced is usually my end goal. I think that artists can occasionally transfer themselves into their work. If there's a warm mood that gets transferred into the paintings, that's fine by me.

## **How do you feel about your last show, *Paintings*, at Canada?**

I'm very happy with it in the end. But oddly, it was probably the least confident I have ever been while preparing for a show. [Laughs] You know, when a [digital] painting is finished, I myself haven't actually touched the canvas yet. I've been making paintings for 20 years and until this show, I've touched every part of my paintings and had the experience of putting the paint onto them. So looking at these new things, I don't have that memory. In a way, I am less attached to them. But that's a good challenge for me, and for my criteria for painting.