

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Art in America

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Michael Williams

NEW YORK,
at CANADA

by Jeff Frederick



While the imagery and meaning of Michael Williams's marvelous paintings may be "Straightforward as a Noodle" (as his recent exhibition at Canada Gallery was called), the method of their making is fairly consistent. First, airbrushed doodles in bright Popsicle colors—summarily rendered people, animals and objects—are laid down on the canvas. A layer of translucent oil wash, usually off-white or ocher but sometimes blue or green, is brushed unevenly across the whole surface, which softens the background forms. Then linear passages of thicker paint—sometimes extruded right out of the tube—are applied on top.

The 14 paintings, in oil on canvas (all 2011), are at a pleasingly human scale of about 6 by 5 feet, framed by unstained wooden slats nailed to the stretchers. The works mark a shift toward abstraction, as compared to those in Williams's 2009 exhibition at Canada, "Uncle Big," which featured a kind of pattern-mad hippie surrealism. Also included in the

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recent show were some small works made of oil on box scraps from 2010 and '11, which already had halation from oil leaching into the cardboard.

The New York-based Williams (b. 1978) works his airbrush in an unusual way, in that he uses it to make lines. The soft-edged, ribbony outlines of the bottom layers are more like junior-high-school notebook doodles than comics. Yet the grotesque faces fading into the background suggest an affinity with George Grosz or the cartoonist Edward Koren. At medium distance the paintings call to mind Cy Twombly's graffiti-like works, both because of the seemingly random distribution of graphic outbursts on the canvas, and because they sometimes suggest the crude imagery of public-bathroom scrawls. The breast- or penis-like knobs that appear are like those in Twombly's or Carroll Dunham's work, but they also come out of Williams's recent puzzle-piece series, in which convex and concave shapes interlock across the surface of the canvases.

Many of Williams's titles are comic or ironic, and even if we don't always get the reference, they reinforce a humorous, self-deprecating tone that is in the work. *Who OK'd This?* has clumps of dried paint stuck to its surface, a "transgression" that may have prompted the question. In the understandably titled *Everything Bagel*, perhaps the most complete statement of Williams's method, the artist seems to throw in every possible color and texture of paint, and he tops it all off with a line of silicone sealant. The relatively simple *Purity Control* submerges the imagery of the underlayer beneath an almost shit-like brown, with a minimal amount of thicker, linear paint added on top.

Even where there seems to be no attempt to create a unified image, Williams's paintings somehow cohere. The painter performs a risky high-wire act, but ultimately he succeeds. One can imagine finding something new, and pleasantly surprising, in these recent works every day.

Photo: Michael Williams: Everything Bagel, 2011, airbrush and oil on canvas, 68 by 52 inches; at Canada.