

# The New York Times

ART & DESIGN

## Art in Review

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By THE NEW YORK TIMES NOV. 5, 2009

### MICHAEL WILLIAMS

#### Uncle Big

*Canada*

*55 Chrystie Street near Hester Street*

*Lower East Side*

*Through Nov. 15*

Michael Williams's New York debut at Canada in 2007 was memorable for a painting of a long-haired dachshund that, like Alice in Wonderland, had suddenly outgrown its surroundings. It fit into the interior of a brightly colored wood-paneled room as into a snugly fitting box. There is nothing quite so endearingly goofy in Mr. Williams's second show, which is — nonetheless or as a result — stronger. The paneling appears to have won.

In "Mike's Zone," a painting hanging near the gallery's entrance, it completely dominates in the form of a rough white background with wood grain outlined in a rainbow palette of concentric ellipses, ovals and hourglasses that suggest the legacy of modernist abstraction. This combination defines the floor, ceiling and walls of the deeply receding space to somewhat itchy effect; the interior could be interpreted as Mr. Williams's comfort zone, or the inside of his brain. Either way, the white-ground wood grain recurs in several other paintings here.

In "Surf'n Turf 2," it all but surrounds a lobster and a bivalve as they work at a computer. In "Jig Flaw," it insidiously assumes the shape of a tree surrounded by other types of paneling and patterning in other color combinations. They interlock, like the pieces of a puzzle, making occasional allowances for a human face, a profile or foot. The habit of applying paint as if routing wood with a delicate blade contributes to the cheerful claustrophobia.

## GLADSTONE GALLERY

In the seemingly nocturnal “In the Woods,” a white wood-grain tree appears to be swooning while several thicker, more colorful trees remain upright; the image resembles one of Fred Tomaselli’s seamless resin paintings remade in more traditional materials, but rambunctiously. “Peanut” features a cat on a vivid, maplike Ping-Pong table, while “Bacon ’n’ Eggs” depicts a paintbrush with several shadows standing at an easel, making a painting of another brush reclining on a couch.

Mr. Williams is largely self-taught and still learning, but he conveys the lively impression of being both true to himself and willing to mess around.

**ROBERTA SMITH**