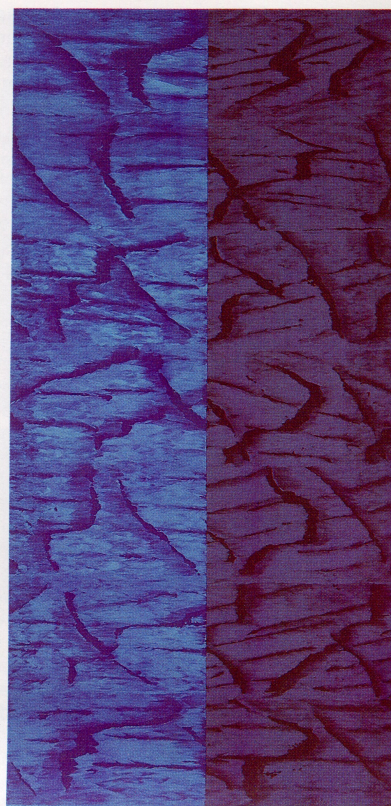




▲ William T. Williams, *Bleecker Street*, 1979. *Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 48"*. Courtesy Touchstone Gallery.

## FROM EXPLOSION TO IMPLOSION: THE TEN YEAR TRANSITION OF WILLIAM T. WILLIAMS

APRIL KINGSLEY



William T. Williams, *Summer '79, 1979*. *Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 30"*. Courtesy Touchstone Gallery.

Perceptive artists of the 1970s realized that less was not only not more but that it was rapidly desiccating into an academy. Art that was only about process, or pure form, or information came to seem as empty as success without effect. For William T. Williams the 1970s were a time of personal upheaval and self-searching when he challenged his formalist training and sought to integrate the content of his life with his art. Taking the formal aspects of art for granted, his goal was something he called a "posture, a certain attitude toward life and the incidents of life being important in the creation of the work of art."<sup>1</sup> Patterned yet unpredictable, the calmly controlled chaos in Williams' recent work gives the measure of a man profoundly involved with questions of meaning and the role of the artist in today's society.

To oversimplify the transition he's made in the last ten years into one broad stroke, it could be said that Williams has given up the public statement in favor of private, one-to-one communication. The loud volume of his hyperactive canvases of the years around 1970 has been turned down to a gentle, conversational tone where artist and audience meet on mutually respected ground. Instead of blasting out at the viewer with saturated, clashing hues and dynamic shapes, his new paintings have a measured tension where violence is tempered by patience and the viewer is invited to participate in the ebb and flow of the pictorial action. The light no longer results from the sparks given off by abutting, contrasting planes of color—it now glows from within the matrix of the myriad painterly units that comprise the surface. It is tonally bound into the structure of the painting rather than being generated optically between the surface and the viewer's eyes. One must now enter the painting, seeking nuances and pentimenti to find the origin of the painting's light; one must allow oneself time to adjust to that light, and to follow the rhythms and counter-rhythms he establishes in order to "see" the paintings.

When Williams burst upon the New York scene in 1968 with his radical, spangled, linoleum-covered "pattern" paintings, and followed them with brilliantly colored, explosive, geometric illusionism, he was way ahead of his time. The earlier paintings predicted both the literal reliefs of Frank Stella a few years later and the P&D (Patterning and Decoration) so pervasive now. At

the time he thought "there was no reason that linoleum and wallpaper, which after all had been used by the Cubists and Matisse, couldn't be used barefaced,"<sup>2</sup> which, of course, is how many artists are thinking today.

The declarative stance of Williams' early paintings—one of which, *Elbert Jackson L.A.M.F., Part II* was acquired by the Museum of Modern Art in 1969—was in keeping with the single-image, immediately graspable impact of '60s hard-edge abstraction. Though they were then seen in a formalist context, and seem highly formalized now to Williams himself, there were aspects of even these works which separated Williams from pure or minimal formalists, specifically those references to visual material outside of art—poor people's floor-covering, gaudy fabrics, and cheap shop-window decor—as well as the sheer violence contained within his rectangles. Both of these subversive defections from '60s "cool" came as a result of his desire, then in a formative, unself-conscious stage, to bring real life into his art. The culmination came in 1971 when he covered the walls of the enormous Reese Paley Gallery in Soho with wildly writhing color forms, opening the show to the musical accompaniment of blaring radios. It was an environment of total positivity; there were no negative spaces where one could rest.

But R&R was not in store for Williams; instead he went into a protracted period of reflection and repeated retrenching in order to sort out why and what he was painting. Both his art's relevance and his audience were, and still are, matters of great concern; his art's ability to reflect his life and the lives of non-art people became overridingly important to him. He was less visible on the scene in 1972 and didn't exhibit at all in 1973. He married, had a child, settled into a regular teaching schedule which included summers of teaching in Skowhegan, Maine. He lived, as he still does, on Broadway above Houston Street (across from the Broadway Central which just collapsed one day into a heap of bricks), surrounded by decaying buildings and people (the Bowery is a short distance away). Thus, intimacy, stability, predictability, the realities of urban existence and the visual rewards of nature were all factors in his life which he couldn't see reflected in the work he had been doing.

He began to explore touch, painterly nuance, "making his mark." Restricting his palette to a single hue, he aligned these





William T. Williams, *Mr. Lewis*, 1979. Acrylic on canvas, 58 x 36". Courtesy Touchstone Gallery.



▲ William T. Williams, *Tune for Nila*, 1980. Acrylic on canvas, 85 x 55½". Courtesy Touchstone Gallery.

"touches" in rows within geometrical units that essentially comprised the skeleton or a diagram of the inclined, intersecting planes of his earlier paintings. The paint strokes picked up light variously as they ran parallel or counter to the enclosing shapes, creating an impression of collaged fragments or relief. Touch fought with structure (as diametrically opposed things always do) until 1977 when touch won its independence. The autographical marks became sufficiently large and strong as shapes to absorb the structure, internalizing it as an infrastructure. Involvement with Egyptian hieroglyphs, Islamic calligraphy, cave paintings, and with the kinds of decorative motifs seen on vernacular architecture in Africa during a visit there for Festac in 1977, stimulated him to trust the message-bearing mark enough to let go of geometric form. As assembled to form *The Taxi-Dancers* in 1980, *Tale for Shango*, *E-Flat Green*, and *Ashanti Walk* take on a ceremonial presence and grandeur. The marks in procession shift from dark on light to light on dark as they cross the artificial boundaries bisecting each canvas and the real ones separating one canvas from another. Progressions that set up a regular rhythm are aborted, then picked up elsewhere. The marks are like primitive or children's stick figures, but they also remind one of musical staves. They seem printed on the surface at times, hand painted at others; a filmic flicker creates a sense of movement, or vice versa.

Williams' color changed a great deal in these mid-'70s years as well, becoming heavier and more earthbound. Higher keyed, lighter hues gave way to weightier red-browns, burgundys, darkened aquas, and magentas. His use of pearlescence and metallic pigments only reinforced this connection with the stones and substances of the earth, but the sources of his imagery had also become, by 1978, predominantly the patterns of nature—trees aligned on a hillside, flocks of birds, the repetitive cellular structures of plants and the human body, and the rhythms of moving water. His surfaces have become increasingly dense, as layer upon layer of chalk-thickened rhoplex go down before the color; structure, direction, and tone are perfect adjuncts within the stroke of paint.

The fluidity of Williams' marks, achieved not by brushing the paint on but by letting it fly off sticks or the ends of palette knives, is perfectly in tune with the linear flow of his imagery.

The rapidity of the paint application, which creates the impression of swiftly speeding gestures accumulated and superimposed but not clogging up the surface, or congealing into muddy messes, seems timed right for the kicking, dancing, leaping forms that skitter across the picture space. Syncopated rhythms set up by the larger units are played against the repeated grace notes of small marks while, overall, tonal shifts cross borders without skipping a beat. Chaos may reign for a while, as it seems to in the lower section of *Bleecker Street*, but the regular patterns and insistent verticals are always reestablished, even though not always with the clarity of *Du Drop* or *Bond Street*. All the paintings in his January exhibition at Touchstone were divided into two sections, either horizontally or vertically, with two dominant, if unnameable, colors working against each other. Someone once said you can always measure a colorist by how he or she handles pink: you can tell by the range of pinks Williams uses, and their remarkable friction when juxtaposed with reds or oranges, what a master colorist he is. He generally keeps the tones close across the dividing lines in a given canvas, while putting a wide gap between the temperatures or the acidity levels of the hues.

One might describe Williams' new paintings as being backlit. The inward glow of *Du Drop* or *Mr. Lewis* seems crepuscular, the way colors do, turning blue-black at nightfall. The rapid but measured imagery seems totally natural, as though not actually made by human hand, but having sprung onto the surface by some process of growth or decay. Even the artist is surprised by how lacking the paintings are in art history, as though, like Jackson Pollock's drip paintings seemed to have done, they just appeared out of nowhere. There is a kind of vitalized presence in these canvases; the marks, like molecules precipitated in a glowing void, seem to narrate an esoteric religious doctrine to a steady musical beat. They speak directly to you, without the artificial intervention of style; they are inward-turning, intimate paintings.

1. Excerpt from a discussion on WBAI in January of 1980 in conjunction with the *Afro-American Abstraction* exhibition at P.S. 1 (Ann Stubbs moderating; April Kingsley, Brenda Wallace, Al Loving, Melvin Edwards, Jack Whitten, and Williams participating).

2. Dore Ashton, Exhibition catalogue, Miami-Dade Community College, November 14-December 1, 1977.