

Press release  
June 2020

Sue Williams

June 5 to July 25, 2020  
Waldmannstrasse, Waldmannstr. 6, CH-8001 Zurich

*About Sue Williams*

I visited Sue Williams' studio on March 8. That means she was among the last people (aside from my wife) with whom I spent any time in person before the Covid-19 pandemic drastically reconfigured our social and working lives to eliminate face-to-face meetings. And her paintings were the very last I saw in person (aside from the ones that hang in my own home).

I'm glad it was Sue that I saw, and I'm *really* glad that I was able to spend that time with her paintings, which have been recurrent in my memory and imagination and helped me sustain what little equilibrium I've been able to muster since then. Those paintings, or even just my memory of them, turn out to be good company in catastrophe. They somehow know how I feel living a life turned upside down, a life in which it's now hard not to feel that calamity has been preparing itself in innumerable abuses of power, whether they take place in the intimate realms of gender and the family or in the geopolitical realm in which governments continue to work behind the scenes to ensure that no good crisis will ever go to waste.

Sue is not the only artist whose work has evoked these facts of our collective existence, of course, but the way she brings them into her work is unique, because she has no interest in persuading us of the seriousness of her concerns, or of the importance of her treatment of them; she has never cultivated a style that is austere, grim, or lugubrious, even in the bluntest of her early works. The tone of her work is neither apocalyptic nor mournful. It has always been imbued with humor, but over time the humor has become less visceral, more elegant. It's hard to think of any painter working today whose work is so high-spirited, *free*-spirited, more buoyant. With her bright, translucent colors, wittily virtuosic and unpredictable line, and lightness of touch, not to mention her anti-gravitational sense of composition in which up, down, and sideways are all one, Sue's aesthetic might be defined as a Rococo of distress, or as what protest art would be if it could be part of a tradition that somehow encompassed both Florine Stettheimer and Cy Twombly.

I've remarked before about Sue's penchant for describing the aesthetic of even her most obscene paintings as "pleasant," even as "happy." I think I know what she means: The painting should not take as its model the will to domination that might be its subject. It shouldn't lean on the viewer, should not pummel the viewer into submission. No. Rather, the painting should lighten the load its viewer carries, not by distracting us from our troubles but by showing that what oppresses us can be made smaller than the spirit that bears witness to it and knows the oppression for what it is. I think that's why the multitude of distinct images that flow together in each of Sue's recent works are so petite—because while she can never forget the wrongs and absurdities they chronicle (and nor does she want anyone else to forget them)—she knows that according to the scale of consciousness, they can become puny. What's "pleasant" in Sue's paintings is not what the merely pleasant in art usually is, the lie that's more agreeable than the truth, but rather the triumph of the truth-teller's art (and what truth could there be without art?) over the very bitterness that is at the heart of the real. To me, that pleasantness—that *pleasure*—lends the courage to persist.

*Barry Schwabsky*

## GALERIE EVA PRESENHUBER

Sue Williams was born 1954 in Chicago Heights, IL, US, and lives and works in New York, NY, US. Her first solo exhibition with Eva Presenhuber took place in 1999. Williams' work is represented in major museums and private collections worldwide, including the Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY, US; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY, US; Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C., US; the Art Institute of Chicago, IL, US; and Sammlung Goetz, Munich, DE. In the fall of 2015, a retrospective monograph was released by JRP|Ringier. Solo exhibitions in museums include Vienna Secession, Vienna, AT; IVAM Valencia, SP; Geneva Center for Contemporary Art, Geneva, CH; and Staatliche Kunsthalle Baden-Baden, Baden-Baden, DE. Williams participated in 3 consecutive Whitney Biennials in 1993, 1995, and 1997. Major institutional group shows include *Comic Abstraction*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY, US (2007); *Rebelle*, Museum voor Moderne Kunst Arnhem, Arnhem, NL (2009); *Keeping it Real*, Whitechapel Gallery, London, UK (2010); *Figuring Color*, The Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, MA, US (2012); *Take it or leave it*, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, CA, US (2014); *America is Hard to See*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY, US (2015); and *Painting 2.0*, Museum Brandhorst, Munich, DE (2015-16).

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