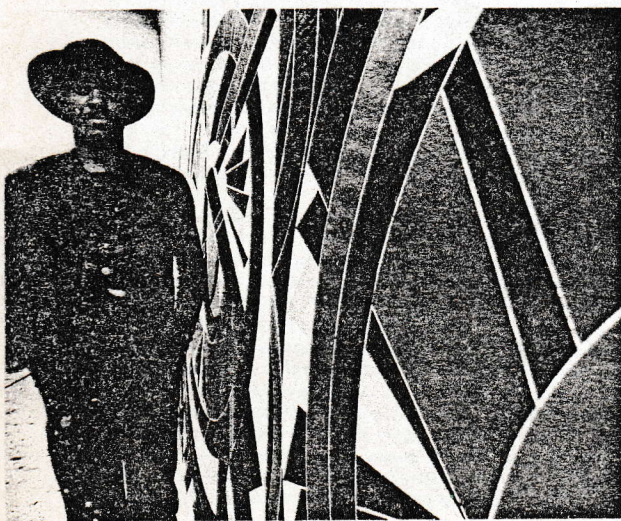




William T. Williams: *It's the Time of the Mind in the Middle of the Day*, acrylic, 7 by 15 feet.

652 Broadway



William T. Williams. Photograph by Robert Colton.

hour's work of his generation seems most intelligent and *ergo* most intelligible. He has spent most of his time peering through optical devices and has painted constantly, never drawing people or things, though in geometry he liked to make A and B represent a lighthouse. Like the propositions of classical geometry, his painting will not give rise to controversy nor does it need that support.

11th Floor

On William T. Williams' floor one finds angry, uncanny fire, with fire's original sense of humor. And the fire is not always what it seems to be, as a burning tar pot at a distance looks like a million-dollar blaze and a fire in a refrigerator looks simple but blinds you. Most painting lacks the everyday "killer instinct," and this seems to be the thematic in his "Overkill" show, paradoxically putting the street in the gallery. It shows that when you are blinded, it is the everyday things which are hard. Williams rejects the manner of painting that reminds me of a young student's idea of diamonds on the moon: "like unspoiled little pompoms—I wouldn't want to wear them." He paints a formal and psycho-social allegory and his sculpture in metal and his cardboard and linoleum works come out of a ground of scars and flaws. "Suffering was for the '50s," however, and Williams is not inspired by the inevitably ridiculous frontal attack. He rejects moreover the fixed moment of Frank Stella, the moment when all rectangles meet and do not warp. Though one painting he has acquired is an Albers, he may set his own paintings on the floor. Landscape perspective being too easy as was the "anonymous edge of Kelly," what he loves are the subway posters of England, the African languages, the canonic and durable art of Egypt. He would like to teach color by rearranging the Metropolitan's collection so that a funeral stele might be placed on linoleum, and he can envisage his own art placed in various contexts, as in barber shops or laundromats, unframed. He does not employ the jeweler's rouge that removes all scars. His works in a park uptown have swiftly become real targets for children. His watercolors too evolve powerfully, with an archaic geometry of phallic sunrays. He is a most ingenious juggler with compressed space, calm as the architect who collapses as the house floats, and he says, "Earth works were done by slaves who later became Baptist ministers and wrote essays about numerical symmetry."

Williams has a true predecessor in the Pyramids, the Pyramids being furniture that lasts. When questioned about Information Art, he told Continued on page 85

randomly selected color through a fabric screen of various dots on already wet and receptive *other* fabric (in this case cotton duck) makes for a kind of tough choosing that only such a sensibility can pull off. The pictures are so new and mysterious that only intuition tells me this *down home brother* has it in his hands, his mind, his psyche. His mind reading back to me is laughter. His very body action makes every mark without a mistake, even though painting is full of mistakes.

Dan Johnson's work is, he says, in transition. He is under no illusion as to what it is he is doing. His sculpture may be a spectator sport, but his commitment is without question. His position in the community is easily consistent with his status as a kind of *Ebony* magazine STAR, emerging into a larger society. It's more than Bill Bojangles Robinson tapping out and shuffling the *Star Spangled Banner* at a party for President Nixon...or Larry Rivers' arrogant remark about "a better life for black people with the emergence of people like William Williams..." If River's remark has any truth or meaning, it is only true in my opinion for Dan Johnson, who is a magic man and should be Mayor of Soho, at least.

652 Broadway continued from page 52

me that George Washington Carver was the greater concept artist and the peanut his concept, and what better than Carver's landscape architecture? Williams' early works were prodigiously eclectic, with roiled stainings and abrupt rectangularities. He was not to remain interested in the velocity of the brushstroke, but has been impelled to a more Léger-like muralism, an unmediated, populist vulgar, jazz as in Miles not Stuart Davis, with a strong center if less energy about the edges. The name of Williams' Great Dane is Indigo, living with the painter and never discussing his works, that might be accused of being too taut, too aggressive, too maximal, but they are fugues with flash, deriving in an interesting way from the depth of Moholy-Nagy and Albers at Yale (where Williams studied) into the horrible green light of the street. The painting does not fall apart like a feather, nor does it strain after the political in listless stories, though the loops, pyramids and seeming question marks look hemmed-in and anxious: circumstances of the composition seem to force the elements to restrain their desires. It is a painting of visible, marked conflict. The relations in the works are demanding relations, offending relations. There is not a smooth run on the canvas but interruptions by textures that glitter and bristle, sequin textures, for instance. These unmitigated compositions are only slightly suppressed by an unaccelerated perspectivelessness. Even the simple and almost Caro-like sculpture of a pig trough, executed for the John de Menils, registers as a vehement weight, as if it says, "If Ellison was a prophet, Baldwin a Parisian priest and Leroi Jones manipulated by media, then am I a little dot?" Here is an infuriated if austere self-laceration, as in his use of glittery clouds of sequins upon cheap rose-patterned linoleum: it does not allude to O'Keeffe but keeps its own cloudy sublime of the wretched.

His series, with their sunrays and combinations of Seals of Solomon and Pyramids with blue Niles pouring through them, stand as the painter would have them stand, like a chorus of airless Bojangles. The Star of David and the Egyptian tombs interlock and warp once more. There is motion in Williams' painting as much as Muybridge and the closed fist of an abstract symbolism. The motifs may be unraveled, as a pentacle may be a spinning-top, but the intimate rage is always veiled. As in the American Indian and African art, whose magical marks and spiritual politics he loves, his narrative and formal parts interact "in a knowable manner," but the sum total, he feels, "is not knowable." It is not modules, but an unpredictable art like the cat "who could pee anywhere at any time." The paintings are pregnant, filled with almost hormonal activity, with a preference for violet not the expansive yellow that might eat into the outline. The

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paintings are filled with a due fear and terror and we are treated by the painter to a not very pacific composition. "One cannot sleep on a hammer."

He is a master of textural varieties, as in his catalogue raisonné of linoleum renderings: linoleum with sparklers, linoleum with masking tape crosses, linoleum with the Stars of David, thence to linoleum with running snakes, linoleum with wavy lines and little snakes floating, linoleums with a series of dots if not polka dots, linoleums with square cards on which is printed Walter Jones, Actor, linoleum as a base for his brilliant light-bulb sculpture, entitled *George Washington Carver Crossing the Dupont River*. All the linoleum works are made and fitted to the site so they do not emerge airless from a low-ceiling installation or too airy outside. The pictures are filled with a challengingly compressed space; the scale is what the artist describes as "overscale." That is, anytime you look, it's a detail; and a scale derived from a format of 9 by 7 1/2 feet is maintained in pictures of 5 by 7. These are complex paintings with no censoring. These fans, these loops, this linoleum, are the fans, the floors, the motifs of the painter as master funeral-director—paintings of a future that will not be getting any better. Williams has attained a signature of a stained turmoil, however, not an irritability.

He is part of the return to the surface, a surface that tells more than "no hand, no traces, no re-emergings, no fuzz or pour." He is one who looks into the accordion openings of the Sonia Delaunay watercolors and modes and is doing his own continuum of watercolors along with a sculptural circus in cardboard. He also does a continuous series of preparatory and self-sufficient drawings, in the casual style, trying "to spill the beans" in the manner of the late Frank O'Hara. With its overtly compressed space, its packed and distressing composition, it is still not merely the last field painting of the uncomfortable or unconsenting field. As early as the third century one finds compositional divisions of a narrative art into panels. In Williams one discovers such unity without the skittish, from side to side, from icon to icon, from stage to stage. If there is a chaos in the fashion, it is expressive of a situation of "chaos," in which each panel is a page, each page an agon, and the colors staggered too to stagger us with principles of controverted variations and centering. The colors converge and rally; the private narrative broadcasts and spreads. Such painting has come to be confused, like running, with hard work, and the trend of the times is against it. As my little sister told me, while sketching, "I hate my art teacher...but I love art." As the lawn mower did away with the scythe, and perhaps no one had to mourn the replacement of the wash tub by the washing machine, and as elevators supplant stairs, in a sense—still, the fact is that as soon as we give up painting and compressed space, a whole series of regressive changes occurs, a weakness; unused muscles start to shrink. Painting may be like the automobile air-conditioner that one has to run a bit even in December lest its seals dry and become leaky. Vital and important Williams is. It is not exactly lawful to paint, to paint a continuum of symbolic political and private panels, and the multitudes shudder at the torment and settle for preservative photography or the informal telegram (framed), but Williams is a brazen painter of unexpected intrusions, of random series and sequin textures, an intense imagist. But these are paintings and not merely a breaking off of the commandment against painting—they are systematized with a retained and recurrent visible idea, for example the mythography of interlocking Egyptian and Israeli icons. The colloquial work, the linoleums, also seem to say: "We are like farmers in relation to funerals. We have seen so many animals die...but this is different."

As Williams concludes: "Myth of Revolution...this community of culture will not depend upon geographical confines, especially when these confines are destructive to dreams. The dreams of dreamers are directly related to the system which suppresses them...blackness is always the subject matter in the mind of the insane...so complex as to define description. The future of the unreal is the life-line of Blackness...do not look for stylistic developments..."