

# Artist Spurns Commercialism Of Some Abstract Expressionists

WINSTON-SALEM — Not long ago, I found myself at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, standing before paintings by Clyfford Still, Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman, among the giants of the Abstract Expressionist movement that flowered in this country 40 years ago.

I felt nailed to the floor, dumbfounded and very moved.

What got me was the sense of the heroic in these huge canvases pulsing with intense colors. By forgoing representation and other forms of imagery, these artists seemed willing to pursue painting on its own terms, exploring the possibilities of color and form, a courageous and noble act.



Art

**Richard  
Maschal**

The same spirit animates the work of William T. Williams, 42, at the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art (SECCA). Born in Fayetteville, Williams, who teaches at Brooklyn College, has lived in New York for 15 years. This is his first major exhibition in his home state.

Unlike others of his generation who've abandoned abstraction, Williams has chosen to continue the explorations of Rothko, Still and others, albeit in a highly personal way. His work contains no hint of the commercialism rampant in contemporary art circles. Williams seems to be an artist who consults inner forces, rather than one holding a wet finger to the winds of fashion.

In the catalogue essay, David Driskell, an art professor at the University of Maryland, divides Williams's work into four periods. Only the first period, when Williams used geometric forms, is not represented. The second period shows Williams influenced by color-field painters such as Still, Rothko, Newman and others.

The colors are subtle and muted, pearlescent greys and pinks that cover the canvas-like skin. Williams uses minimal brushwork to accent the surface with what looks like a basket weave or herringbone pattern. These paintings, with slightly metallic colors, reflect light like faceted jewels.

In the next group of works, Williams turns to another giant of abstraction, Jackson Pollock, in exploring the physicality of paint. A rich impasto covers these canvases, the paint so thickly applied it's cracked and crusted.

Divided horizontally or vertically into planes of contrasting color, these works have the feel of landscapes, a sense of great dimension and purpose. Looking at "Savannah," it's easy to see thick tree trunks, a tangled forest in the eastern coastal plane where Williams was born.

But the colors in these works are too insistent to completely allow such a reading. They pulse and force their way to the surface, the blue underneath pink and yellow in "Batman" screaming to get out.

With the next period, Williams takes a radical jump.

The paint becomes even thicker, streaking down the canvas like melted candle wax. The colors become even more vibrant and alive, red showing up for the first time. And a bit of figuration appears, the hand, not so much painted as formed with paint on the canvas.



**"Cross Creek" by William T. Williams**

The hand stands for the artist, for man the maker, of art and other things. The open hand also is a gesture of greeting, of friendliness. In the posture associated with Christ in many religious paintings, and used by the priest during the Eucharist, it is an expression of sacrifice and humility.

All these associations come together in Williams's works. "Cross-Creek" can be read as a self-portrait. The hands are black tinged with white, and white tinged with black. Williams is a black artist, and the underpainted white peeping through, according to the catalogue essay, comes from a technique used by Henry Tanner, a 19th-century black artist Williams admires.

Several hands in "Cross-Creek," a title taken from the since-vanished crossroads community he grew up in, are green and black. The top of the painting is banded in the color zones reminiscent of Williams's earlier work, with a suggestion of landscape and depth.

In this work, Williams sums up his life and inspiration. His art clearly comes out of his guts and heart, from the sights of his childhood in the South.

The spark skips from the painting to the viewer, and, in a transforming instant, the art disappears, revealing its maker.

## **—If You're Going**

"William T. Williams: Paintings" will be at the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art, 750 Marguerite Dr., Winston-Salem, through July 21. Prices range from \$9,500 to \$18,000. Hours are 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday and 2-5 p.m. Sunday. Details: (919)-725-1904, during those hours.