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Breakout Artists 2020: Chicago's Next Generation of Image Makers

APRIL 30, 2020 AT 8:00 AM BY KERRY CARDOZA

Brittney Leeann Williams / Photo:Chris Edwards

Brittney Leeanne Williams

Brittney Leeanne Williams' paintings depict figures in transformation and bodies subject to unseen pressures or forces. In Williams' own words, the figures twist and knot themselves into emotional landscapes. These figurative and pictorial inversions create a body-space continuum. Their

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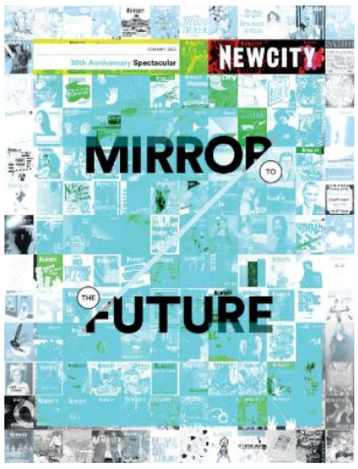

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postures hold tensions that connect the present moment to centuries past. Associations can be made to Egyptian friezes, mythical goddesses, classical sculpture, surrealist landscapes and Laura Aguilar's photographic self-portraits, to name a few. Like Aguilar, Williams' figures are both subject and object. Figures lift, prop and carry the weight of another larger yet similarly shaped figure. The doubling of body types leads to familial associations. Williams' titles allude to the biblical Book of Ruth and the mother-daughter relationship. As her figures carry one another, suggestions of how the body holds the weight of psychological traumas begin to emerge. At times it is ambiguous if figures recline in repose or collapse in exhaustion from anguish, which feels like a metaphor for the current political moment.

"Naomi and Ruth: No Beginning and No End," oil on canvas, 45 x 32 inches, 2019

Paintings in a recent group exhibition at Monique Meloche feature bodies that bend in improbable positions, where torsos extend, seamlessly, to become skies. Hierarchies are subverted where bodies and landscapes are one and the same. In a series of paintings, Williams depicts figures that are so solidly, deeply and intensely red that they vibrate as they fold, twist and maintain (or rather endure) complex physical maneuvers. Repetition of the red figure across many works is a siren call of urgency and symbolizes love or rushing blood. Curves of the body and zoomed-in cropping create tension, where bodies act as framing devices and simultaneously push against the pictorial frame, making expansive landscapes out of flesh. Legs and feet are firmly planted, both grounding and suspending the figure. Torsos stretch to impossible lengths and create a full circle to envelop and seemingly protect the self. It's almost as if the figures are engaged in their own transfiguration for the viewer to witness: a process and struggle both internal and manifesting itself external. The overall mood of her paintings on canvas and on paper is introspective and contemplative as the faces are almost always shielded from view. The ways in which Williams depicts volume and elegant shape lend themselves to flat color field painting where suggestion of shadow and form lead to flat planes of color. Yet the details of physical features or specific places remain open-ended and hint at abstraction.

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"A Gateway Out," oil and acrylic on canvas, 16 x 20 inches, 2019

After moving to Chicago in 2008, Williams hit the ground running. She has been an artist-in-residence at The University of Chicago Center for the Study of Race, Politics and Culture, participated in HATCH Projects at the Chicago Artists Coalition, and attended residencies at Skowhegan and McColl. According to Williams, the McColl Center for Art + Innovation in North Carolina brought the elements at the edges and in the backgrounds of her paintings into focus. The landscapes and settings that the figures respond to reference the artist's upbringing in Victorville, California, near the Mojave desert. These settings, landscapes and architectural details increase specificity while making the deeply personal into universal meaning through Williams' concise visual vocabulary.

"Dilapidated Rock in Victorville," oil on canvas, 16 x 20 inches, 2019

Williams had a solo show in Los Angeles in 2019 at Zevitas Marcus. Coming up are exhibitions at Alexander Berggruen in New York, Para Site in Hong Kong, the Kathmandu Triennale in Nepal and a solo exhibition at the University Club in Chicago. (Nicole Mauser)

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Newcity presents its 2018 Breakout Artists, a sample of the myriad Chicago makers who deserve our attention and admiration. Whether it's beautiful protest posters wheat-pasted in dive bar bathrooms or gorgeous fabrics woven from pictures and memories, we have artists to thank for the images that move us to feel, to think, and to act.

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Chicago has long been a destination for artists seeking to hone their practice and take their work to greater heights. Hence, it's no coincidence that this art season opens with a retrospective of the original Hairy Who at the Art Institute of Chicago, while the Smart Museum's major exhibition celebrates a broader spectrum of contemporaneous South Side artists—AfriCOBRA, the Association…

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