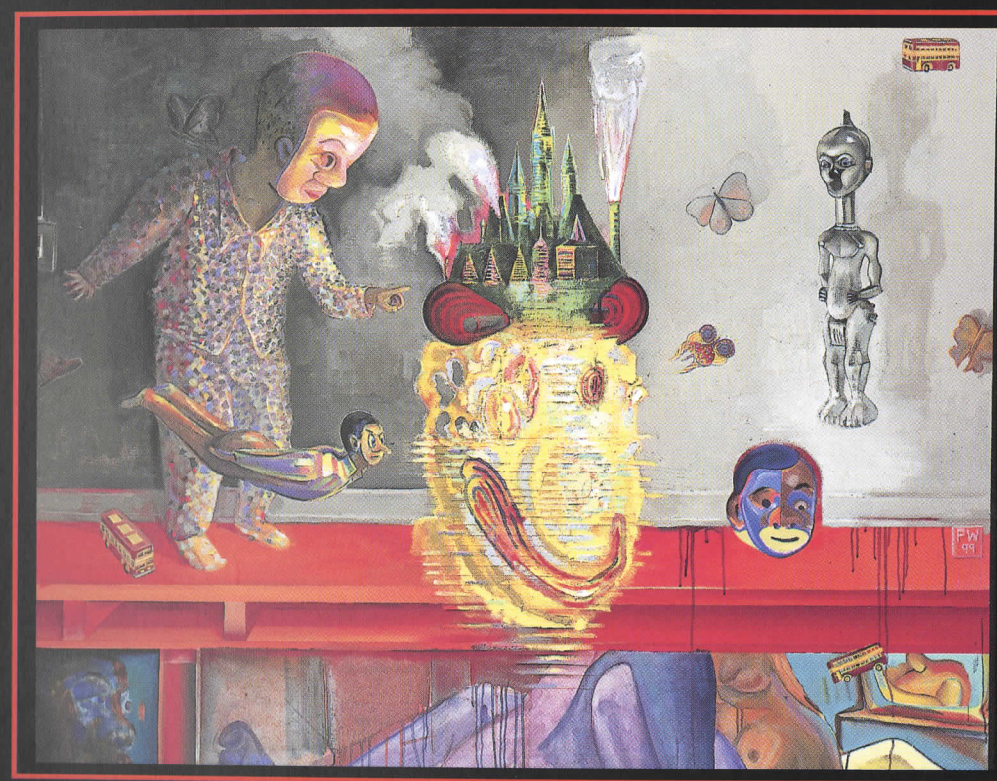




EIGHT YEARS NINE



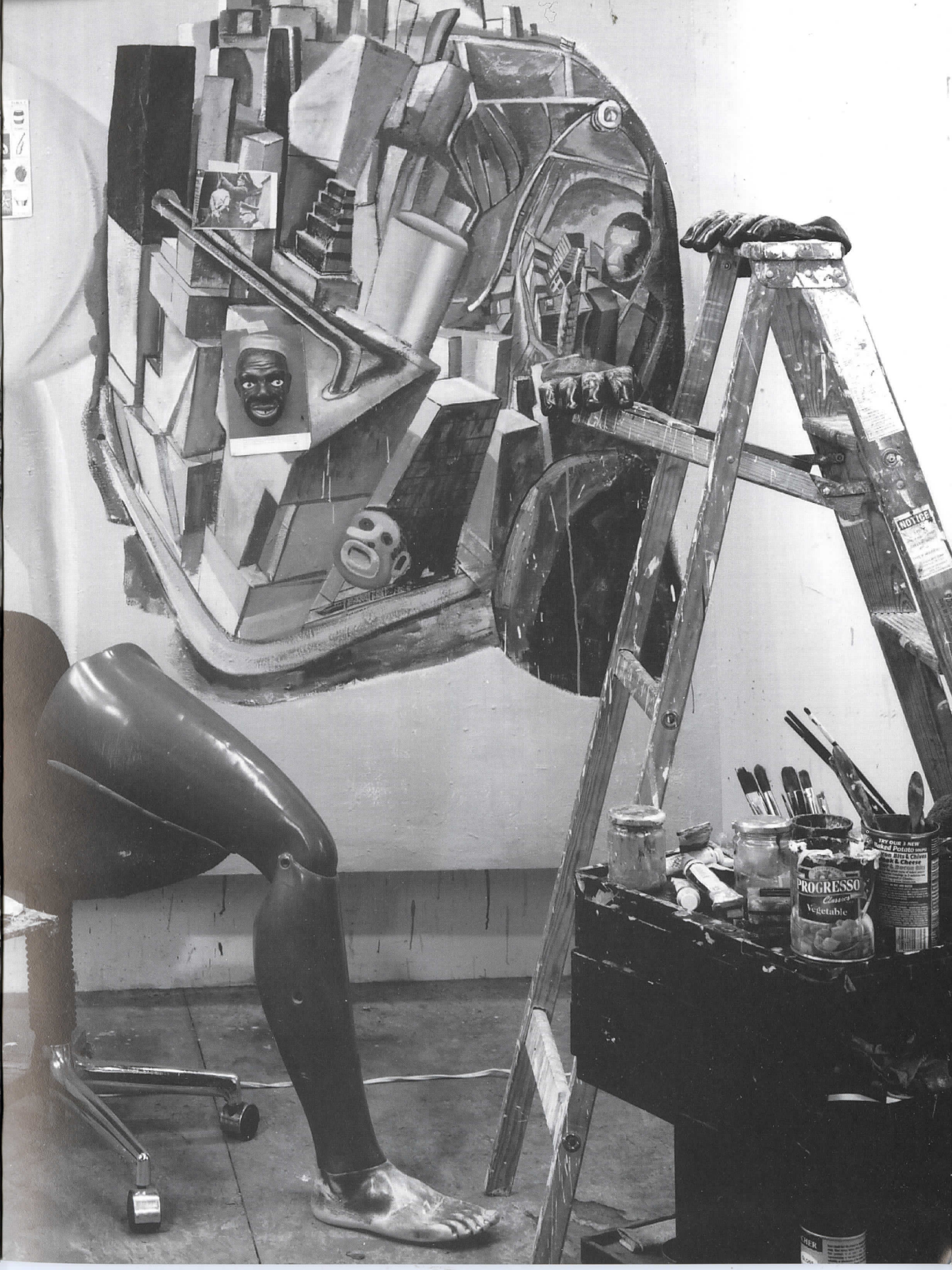
MONTHS SIX HOURS

A Retrospective of Paintings by Peter Williams



Meadow Brook Art Gallery

College of Arts and Sciences
Department of Art and Art History
208 Wilson Hall
Rochester, Michigan 48309-4401



EIGHT NINE SIX

Eight Years Nine Months Six Hours

A Retrospective of Paintings
By Peter Williams

September 8 - October 15, 2000

MEADOW BROOK ART GALLERY

Department of Art and Art History
College of Arts and Sciences
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Cover: *Dondi, Childhood, A Life's Lesson*, 1999,
48" x 60", oil on canvas,
courtesy of Revolution Gallery

Endpaper: The Artists Studio, photo by Tim Thayer

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INTRODUCTION

by Peter Williams



PAINTERLY

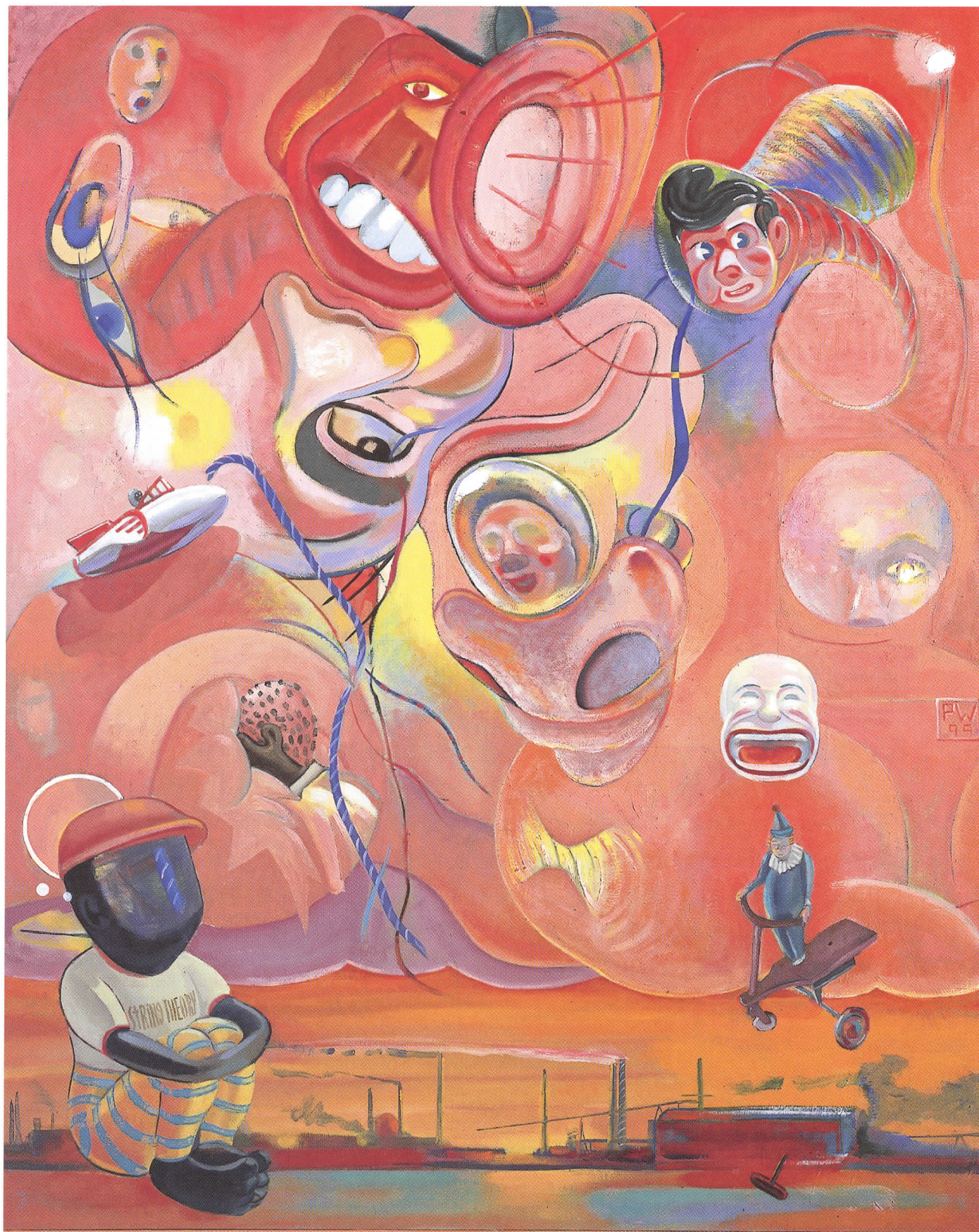
alchemic, resonance – form for the sake of form; if one had no expectations of subject matter, if one knew nothing of race, gender or bigotry, the sublime beauty of the surfaces of Peter Williams' paintings would alone entrance. *Eight Years, Nine Months, Six Hours* is in an exhibition of formal substance, drawing and the fluency of color.

For all his foibles, for it must be asserted from the outset that in mind and body he is a maverick, Peter Williams is a profoundly international artist. Perhaps one needs to live in multicultural cities like London, New York or Paris for a while for this to be recognized. Metropolitan Detroit is not a paragon of multiculturalism, but exhibitions such as this nudge us along the path toward that goal; what is multiculturalism if it is not the delight of, and the immersion in, a vast array of influences and impressions? This body of work plunges us into a wild variety of cultural sources, banal and exotic. We walk the blanché, stucco encrusted streets of Florence; we drive Downtown along the weed infested, faded grandeur of John R; we enter the seedy bricked-up studios of the School of London, eventually alighting upon the hollow world of suburbia with all its sordid subplots, and suddenly, bewilderingly, we find ourselves exposed to the fierce, unforgiving light of Madrid.

And if one tires of polemics, there is always art history: Peter Williams generously shares his studio with all sorts: Chardin, Ensor, African Senufo sculptors; and, of course, the Spaniards: Picasso, Goya and Velazquez. There is a supposition, in fact, that one might be gate crashing some sort of illegal, nutcracker painter's bash. Something profoundly entertaining is happening; accompanied, understandably, by the guilt stoked by a hundred years of antiseptic Modernism, that perhaps painting should not be this amusing.

In the era of television, film and music videos, ask yourself whether these paintings can hold their own. With a vigorous inventiveness, and with a keen eye for substance, delving into the sublime alchemy of oil paint, Peter Williams' masterfully demonstrates why painting has survived as an art form, and why it is still a vital part of human culture.

Dick Goody
Director, Meadow Brook Art Gallery



String Theory, 1999, 60" x 40", oil on canvas

IF

we accept the face of black representation portrayed through the media without challenge and without any clear acknowledgement of what it is actually depicting, then, why is there something uncomfortable and disquieting in the face of Peter Williams extraordinary paintings? Why does the racial mixing of blacks and whites seem so raw and exposed? And what do Aunt Jemima and other characters from Black memorabilia really represent?

These paintings expose the fact that black culture is presented to us through a filter of racial stereotyping and that prejudice is a part of our daily surroundings, but who is doing the stereotyping? Peter Williams' painting talks not just to the dominant culture; they speak directly to everyone as a whole.

Racism is pervasive in America. It's a disease for which we don't know the cure. One of the reasons why Williams' paints so passionately is to work on the cure.

I am excited about this exhibition not just because it gives a black artist an opportunity to show his work outside of the black community, it gives mainstream culture the chance to experience black culture at first hand. This exhibition can only nurture multiculturalism and encourage a genuine discourse on race. This exhibition is a profound experience and a very appropriate event for the university.

Preface by Rachelle E. Wilson
Oakland University
Art History Major

WHEN

I was twelve, my brother brought a college roommate home for spring break. Like my brother he was athletically inclined (which I was not). They both played soccer and it was the basis of their friendship. One evening he brought out a sketchbook and several charcoal pencils. He proceeded to make a quick sketch of my head and within minutes he achieved, to my eyes, a perfect likeness. But even more, he caught something of who I was and what I felt; it was an experience of myself lovingly rendered by a strong black voice. Its voice spoke deeply and completely in a way that I have struggled to understand ever since and whose experience has remained with me to this day. It was my very first introduction to an artist and the skill with which he rendered the drawing and its surety took my breath away.

Years later, on high school a field trip, I was introduced to modern art. It was a simple painting, all black, large, perhaps seven feet square by Ad Reinhardt. I immediately dismissed it as a silly business. Yet a friend told me to look again and to focus this time. To my amazement it revealed a pattern of smaller squares, which revealed themselves slowly and then determinedly, how had I missed this, I wondered, in silent disbelief. I still thought it silly, but I kept turning the experience over and over in my mind trying to figure out, not what he did, but why? For many years my mind returned to this experience and the excitement it created for me, an awareness that I could not grasp or understand. In time, I began to realize that these experiences created a sense of complexity and mystery for me. They gave me insight into myself and to the things that attracted my imagination.

This recent work represents thoughts and a pursuit during the past decade *Eight Years, Nine Months, Six Hours* reflects any stretch of time or concept of time. My work is essentially autobiographical, and formally is about composition and style as a language. Modernity has given us a very convenient set of values or formats in which we can engage the ideal. For me the ideal is this form of visual storytelling, inclusive of high and low art. My task, as I see it, is to record this time and this moment which in itself is all our stories.

Specifically the work engages race and representation and my role in it. My love of the painted surface is also an important consideration. I was trained within the western tradition of painterly form-making and my own tradition of subversive acts. I have always been preoccupied by race. From the very beginning I have searched for a way to represent myself. That first magical act of biography, having someone make a record of my face at twelve years of age, penetrated me deeply and instilled a set of values I could not dismiss. At five, I remember my first awareness of myself. I saw my reflection in a mirror. It was as if I had been set apart - detached from the self. It was not an act of narcissism. It was that first awareness of an outer world. I felt completely vulnerable. It was only through the process of making art that I was able to define my sense of self. And for me through the act of painting, the process of painting has become the cathartic release of private thoughts and distant memories!

Recently, the image of children has surfaced in the work and clearly it is past memory and experience that I am recapturing. Maturity has propelled me into a review of a life lived well and of strange insights. Again, it was that apprehension I felt upon seeing an Ad Reinhardt painting at the Museum of Modern Art. It was, and is, that process of becoming aware, with which I hope to endow my paintings for the viewer. For, at the core of every child is that process of becoming a complete being, which looms large. It encapsulates the

experience of seeing - seeing as a revelation, as a catharsis; seeing the collapse of inner and outer self, as it prevails against the backdrop of conventional wisdom or whiteness. This experience for me, I can only describe as *negritude* (a sensibility guided by the historical challenges of blackness in this country). As a child, this experience of becoming, this recognition of an outer skin, which prevails in all dialogue, became my challenge. Learning to love blackness became an urgent and continual struggle against the historical precepts of this country's *continental divide*. We are challenged at the beginning of this millennium to recognize the true complexity of blackness and we have a great and pressing opportunity to integrate these divided parts into a whole. This is my story and this work represents how I shall tell it!

Peter Williams, July 2000



Studiotime, Alicia and I, 1997, 60" x 60", oil on canvas

THE

exhibition of paintings by Peter Williams at the Meadow Brook Art Gallery represents nearly ten years of work by one of the most prolific artists working in Detroit today. The Oakland University community as well as the greater Detroit area is fortunate to have the opportunity to see a number of canvases by this highly accomplished painter. Williams, a professor of painting at Wayne State University for the past thirteen years, presents the viewer with beautifully executed works that offer a challenging panoply of images. Autobiographical in nature, the images in Williams's paintings constitute a complex set of signs and symbols that are ultimately about crossing boundaries, both personal and cultural. In short, what do these provocative images tell us about the artist? What do they tell us about ourselves?

Life tends to recoil and hide deep inside itself, tends to withdraw into its own inner infinitude, is afraid of boundaries, strives to dissolve them...Aesthetic culture is a culture of boundaries and hence presupposes that life is enveloped by a warm atmosphere of deepest trust.¹

The aesthetic theories of Mikhail Bakhtin, although put forth much earlier in the twentieth century, resonate with clarity today amid the cacophony of post-structuralist rhetoric. Bridging the gap between art and life has been at the core of the creative act and aesthetic experience since human beings first felt the stirrings of an artistic impulse. Bakhtin rightly recognized that the aesthetic experience is an arena in which boundaries are challenged and expanded, and implicit in this exploration is the "warm atmosphere of deepest trust" that is basic to the artist's creative act. For an artist like Peter Williams, who expresses a deeply introspective world of sign and symbol, crossing the boundary from his world to ours, trusting that the dialectic between 'self' and the 'other' will be fruitful, is at the heart of his endeavor.

Central to understanding the iconography in Williams's work is his experience as an African-American artist. Acting as a self-reflective visual dialogue, the imagery in these paintings frequently addresses issues of race and representation and places them within the context of our cultural constructions of identity. Although at first glance many of the images in his paintings seem benign, even playful – toys, cartoon-like figures, advertising clippings, newspaper photographs and the like – we realize that they offer us more complex layers of meaning. The kerchiefed mammy figure appears on a tin collectible, for example (Williams is an avid collector of black memorabilia). Besides conjuring up the idea of motherhood, it is a potent image of race and of racism, of American culture past and present. Meaning depends upon context, Williams is telling us. Images and symbols that have historically served the purpose of marginalization have become deconstructed, so to speak, reappropriated by the artist and set within a framework of memory and personal history. His is essentially a post-modern sensibility, exploring the nature of memory (by its nature destabilized and always in flux) within shifting cultural ideologies.

Rejecting the narrow confines of Afrocentrism, William seeks to expand the artistic dialogue regarding black identity. Like the comedy of Chris Rock (who the artist much admires) which often deals with painful issues of race by subverting stereotypes in the form of parody, Williams also treats his imagery as a text that can be altered and undermined by irony. Ultimately, his goal is to enlarge the possibilities of meaning. Intended to be self-revelatory, Williams' works are peppered with images mined from childhood as well as adult experiences, resulting in a kind of palimpsest of

past and present, of memories and realities that mold and give definition to an individual's life.

Growing up in a white, prosperous upper middle class suburb outside New York City, Williams' background fostered a sense of dual cultural identity. Built into his childhood was the sense of being outside the mainstream of the dominant culture, an experience somewhat similar to those of other backgrounds, such as children of immigrants who often straddle two worlds. It is being in the position of seeing oneself on both sides of the same coin. Unsurprisingly, in such a context, irony can become a valuable coping strategy when ideologies are constantly in flux. Therefore it makes sense when Williams describes the juxtaposition of meaning in his work by saying that sometimes "the images of *this* are really about *that*."

Williams makes beautiful paintings. His sensibility as a colorist is as graceful as it is bold. Williams was trained early in his career in the graphic arts, as a printmaker rather than a painter. His maturation as a painter accelerated when he became a professor of painting; through his own teaching he has learned a great deal about the craft itself. In addition to exploring the role of color, Williams has been finding solutions to the problems of spatial organization in his large scale paintings. In working out these formal issues he has been inspired by a deepening awareness of the Old Masters. Spending time the past several years traveling throughout Europe, particularly in Spain and Germany, he has been especially influenced by the delicate colors of Goya, the compositional subtleties of Chardin, and the haunting surreality of Heironymous Bosch. Strange bedfellows, seemingly, but a growing formal appreciation of past masters has struck a vital chord within Williams's own development.

What do the sumptuously and often expressionistically painted works in this exhibition impart to us then? As a whole, they comprise a personal visual dictionary that is both challenging and at times disturbing. Expressed in a world of sign and symbol, Williams's paintings are about crossing boundaries -- the intersection of his own life experience with a society that imposes its own culturally charged markers regarding race, class, and gender. But it is not a viewpoint that creates irony for art's sake, but, rather it would seem, for life's sake. The theories of Bakhtin are once again appropriate to consider. Bakhtin believed that art, or the creative act, was not only about formal exercise or technical ability. Rather, art is an event that must bear a dynamic relationship with life itself. Artists, he posited, have a significant role to play in the moral and ethical spheres of culture. According to Bakhtin, "the meaning of a creative act evolves in relation to the boundaries – the inside and outside – of the cognitive, ethical, and aesthetic spheres of culture."² In other words, to be meaningful art must address the realities of *lived* lives. The work of Peter Williams fits Bakhtin's criteria perfectly; it invites us to participate within this very sphere -- that of an individual's life within a larger cultural matrix. His art engages us, challenges us, even dares us to confront our own assumptions and beliefs about race, class, and gender. As an artist, Williams expresses how he sees himself. For us, as viewers, his work has the power to transform how we see ourselves.

Tamara Machmut-Jhashi
Assistant Professor of Art History
Oakland University

1. Mikhail Bakhtin, "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity," in *Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays by M.M. Bakhtin*, edited by Michael Holquist, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990, p. 203.

2. Deborah J. Haynes, *Bakhtin and the Visual Arts*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995, p. 19.



Flight, Dark Matter, The German Soul, 2000, 60" x 60", oil on canvas

INTERVIEW

Dick Goody: *These paintings are an amalgam of truth and irony. Whose world are we looking at?*

Peter Williams: At a very early point in my life, when I was first interviewed about my work, the thing that came out was my sense of humor. I think that's something that has stayed with me and perhaps has increased. These painting are about me, but often it's my humorous side that sees the irony in things.

When I first came to Detroit in the early eighties, it seemed that everyone was doing these grotesque urban misery paintings. It was as if they only had rust colors and Prussian blue – as if they could only do paintings of broken down machinery. What did you think when you first came to Detroit?

I thought the work was pretty true for the climate. I'd come from Minneapolis where the major influence was folk art and the tradition of duck carving. Things of that sort gave momentum to the artists so the resulting work was very rich because of its sources of color and form, but, at the same time, I thought the work in Minneapolis very trivial.

But you had gone to Minnesota from somewhere else.

Well, it was part of my big travel; coming from New York, originally, I saw everything growing up. I lived just outside New York City; it was like living at a museum's doorstep. Then I went to New Mexico for my first two years of undergraduate school, which was like being in the middle of nowhere. Being in Minneapolis was not so much a painter's dream, it was more of an intellectual's dream. Ideas, for the first time, were taken seriously and talked about. There were a lot of fancy names. Claude Lévi-Strauss, Marcel Foucault and Jacques Derrida were bandied about – I hadn't a clue what they were talking about, but I pretended I did.

But you'd always gone to strange new environments and had to pick up on the latest thing happening there.

Right. I think that's partly true in hindsight. At the time I think I was running away from someplace. Trying to go someplace else. Maybe it's true in a way because I was always looking for something that would give me more, and I couldn't quite define what more was until I was in my thirties. Before then, I knew wherever I was, there had to be something better. By the time I got to Minneapolis, I knew that as long as I took the risk to look at things differently,

my life would move forward in ways that I couldn't predict. In a way that's what the paintings are about, they're travelling through a lot of memories and experiences.

That's interesting because there's something of the nineteen fifties in the work. There's an element of knowledge of those times like a sort of visual carbon dating. How much of your childhood is carried in this work?

Actually, that's really insightful. I hadn't thought about the fifties so much, but I do relate a lot to the medium of TV – partly because my parents used it as a superficial babysitter, as most parents did in the fifties and early sixties. So the things that I really thought were real, meaning the every day world, were TV shows that had a father, a mother, three perfect kids, a house in the suburbs and everyone's name was Bud or Skippy. "Honey, I'm home!" (laughs) My parents were living, what for most black people would have been, a middle class dream. We were a two-parent household. My mother stayed home. My father went to work every day. We went to museums and galleries and plays and things. I thought that what I was living was the norm and that the TV shows represented the norm as the dominant culture sold it to us.

Let's be nostalgic a moment longer: who's the better painter, Picasso or Matisse?

That's a tough one. When I was younger I thought Picasso was God. As I got older I was convinced of it.

And then you became an atheist...

(laughs) And then I became an atheist and Duchamp entered my life... In reality, as a painterly painter, obviously Matisse is much better. Picasso's a draftsman, he knows how to draw, but he also knows how to steal and compose.

It's funny that we're talking about Picasso and Matisse, a hundred years after the fact, but there's no one else out there like them anymore.

And there probably can't be. They broke a lot of formal ground for Modernism. They laid out the basic tenets. In some ways they represent the last poetic age.

They opened a floodgate.

They lived in extreme times. People were having hand-to-hand combat. You also think of Hemmingway. Matisse's wife constantly threatened to leave him because he was fondling his models. Picasso was a misogynistic nightmare - nihilism and selfishness.

What about on this side of the Atlantic? Who do you think is, or was, the greatest American painter of the twentieth century?

I think you'd be hard pressed to find someone.

How about Jackson Pollock?

I don't think so. He was an incredible innovator who marked a very brief moment - the repercussions of which we're both suffering from and enjoying. The endless repetition of sheer blather that goes on as a result of Pollock is mindless. Everyone who has borrowed from Pollock is borrowing something he borrowed from Matisse. They aren't concrete values anymore. They're redundant ironies that such painters think their paintings should have.

Jackson Pollock was a great painter but flawed human being.

Totally, but we love those.

Do you think that painters tend to be more flawed than say someone who works in an office?

No. In truth, the media projects this image of the artist as this outsider. And then other artists buy into it and try to play the role of a folk hero. But heroic figures like that can't really exist any more. Think of the President. He can't be a hero.

What's the big difference between American painting and European painting?

American art comes from a different place than the Paris School. In the European history of painting, abstraction and formalism are academic principles. Nineteenth century American artists like Frederick Church and Albert Bierstadt painted these huge vistas, these large canvases that talked about a different kind of space which represented a period of massive American expansionism. The post-war period represented an even more revolutionary kind of expansionism requiring a revolutionary kind of painting. Twentieth century American art is all very new. Europe has a thousand years of culture to fall back on. America's idea of culture starts in the advertising age. Our history is in bottles of ginger beer and bars of soap. Before the twentieth century, you don't find much great painting in America that can compare to the European model. There's Thomas Eakins. Who else? I can't think of any great American painters that overall engineered the kind of stylistic change the way the Impressionist did.

You mean the Europeans took greater risks?

Yes, formal risks in the advancement of an evolving language.

So do you think painting is a risky business?

I think today it's very risky. For me the risks are

embodied in specific tasks that have to be adhered to - "the tasks of the artist." This belief system comes from what I believe is missing in American painting - a sense of history.

Could you break those tasks into a list of three or four concrete things?

Well, one is to make manifest your convictions in the painting, whether they're about color, form, content, theme, et cetera, to make the work reflect your experience of that world. I mean your thoughts about it and your politics. Politics is at the core of that for me as a black person. Politics is a manifest destiny. You have to deal with it. The second thing is maturity. This may sound contradictory, but I think as you develop and grow as an artist, you find that theme is not the only answer. You begin to recognize that things that are transcendental like beauty and a kind of established formal complex, things that recognize historical models and talk to them, and things that break from that tradition, not in a completely avant-garde sense, but in a personal sense become important. But you don't know this when you're twenty. You have to mature. It's so much about acquiring the skill to paint. The third thing is to survive. You have to think of yourself as successful, not because you are trying to become famous or make a fortune, it's about surviving long enough to put all those other things into place. And the other task is being contemporary - being aware of the zeitgeist - those things that control your angst.

You've talked about performing these tasks, but on the other hand, don't you think your paintings have a life of their own?

I think they're just beginning to.

And yet they're not as expressionistic as they used to be. What happened?

I think teaching is what happened. Thirteen years of academic teaching really forced me to consider painterly models that I really didn't have to bother about when I was the independent, groovy, funky, underground artist. All of a sudden I had to talk about the achievement of Velazquez. You go and see the thing and then you go back to the studio and you say, in the face of this, I have to become something more than I am.

That's interesting because you're not a classically trained painter, but you are a painter who is profoundly aware of art history. How do you handle this imbalance?

Art history teaches us about the apprenticeship and guild systems of the past. We know what



Gene Pool, 1999, 48" x 60", oil on canvas

Michelangelo and Raphael had to pass through, but you also recognize that there was a great deal of personal ingenuity and inventiveness existing in those artists. I don't know anything about the intellect of Jackson Pollock, but he had an eye – he probably should never have opened his mouth, but he had an eye. That's the kind of intelligence that if you train well enough, the other parts are quick to follow. It's not necessarily all book learning, it's focusing on the qualities you want. You can't dilly-dally. Academic teaching forced me to stop dilly-dallying about what was good and to take a stand and learn from your instincts why that thing is good.

I believe there are really only five themes in painting: sexuality, death, religion, nationality and observation. There are two themes that appear again and again in your work: nationality or race and sexuality. Which is more important?

When I was younger it was race, because it controlled my emotional level more than sex. It pushed more of my buttons. As I got older... "All you need is love," the John Lennon song – they're buzz words for an older man... just to look (at women) is wonderful – anything beyond that is a gift from God! (reflectively) Matisse had his models. He was a visceral painter. From the model, out of the paint came the drawing, whereas with Picasso, the drawing comes out of his head.

Picasso and Matisse again... They both ended their days on the Côte d'Azur. I know it's pure fantasy, but where would you like to end yours?

Why not the Mediterranean?

Not back to Madrid?

Maybe. What you learn from Matisse is that light is everything. To have light around you that is transcendent is a big part of making a painting. Also it's like being in a museum being in Spain. You walk down the street and the building you go into has a small Goya or maybe there's a Zurbarán at the local beaux-arts museum. Quite fantastic.

Do you think that living in Detroit has changed the way you work?

It's depressed me a lot. It's why color is such an important part of my work. The environment here, light-wise, well, it's very gray for much of the year. Secondly it's a city filled with conflict and pain. But I choose to live in the environment in which I teach.

You live in Detroit.

I live in Detroit; I'm aware of that pain. And I also draw from it. My imagery really represents what I experience in the city. One wonders what fifteenth

century Europe must have been like to a painter like Hieronymous Bosch. It was a time of great change, on the other hand it was filled with pessimism and foreboding. His work reveals the complexity of changing attitudes about the church, sexuality and his apprehension about the decent of mankind. Is he a satirist or a pornographer? The same thoughts occupy us today. It's the same mystery I think about as I live and work in Detroit. In my neighborhood I see people who are down on their luck, mentally handicapped, physically deformed, all as a part of an average daily experience and it drifts in. I have never believed in the myth of Birmingham and Bloomfield Hills. They are anachronisms to me. I don't understand that kind of detachment, that lack of vision. It has no place for me. In some ways Detroit is the perfect place for me because it forces me to confront what's outside of myself.

So your paintings address political issues other than race?

Absolutely. It's a glorious tragedy. Only the Greeks had better tragedies. Detroit has these tragedies that you read about, hear about and see.

So what's the good news about Detroit?

The good news is that people are involved in a discourse. It's difficult to see it sometimes because we're so immersed in the dialogue. But I believe painting plays an important role because it doesn't demean the discourse, it elevates it to a higher level. However, one often sees a lack of ideas in much of the work being produced. Our community is going to have to face itself without the burden of the past and the badge of victimship it carries so well, and the white community is going to have to learn a greater sensitivity to this whole process and discussion. The bridge can only be built jointly. We have to create a culture that can engineer this framework.

What about the American Dream?

I have never stopped believing in the American Dream! The things that make America strong are the same things that make it weak. In Detroit, it's amazing how marginalized people are. We need a bigger bridge. It's going to take a lot of work. These things aren't going to go away in the short term. The problem that Detroiters face is that they carry a past around with them everywhere they go.

What's the most difficult thing you ever painted?

Myself. It's very hard looking at, not just the skin, and not just trying to represent yourself, but trying to capture a sense of who you are in comparison to these other abstractions in the painting. It's difficult to

make manifest what you know about yourself - the parts that no one can ever know. Does one make it a stereotype or should it be esoteric? It goes to the heart of what's real. Leading on from that, for me the high point of painting is about illusion and a certain kind of pictorial space. It's very hard to do especially when the twentieth century tradition is so much about flat space. American Modernism is about a flat space.

It's so much easier to do flat paintings.

It's easier... But that's what made America great. It found a way to make painting easy.

On the other hand, your painting doesn't look particularly American to me. You draw like an Englishman, by which I mean there's a neurotic charge where you work and rework lines over and over again until they almost collapse from the weight of being worked. You see the same thing in Lucian Freud's and Frank Auerbach's painting. You know more about twentieth century English painting than anyone else I know in this country.

What's going on?

What's beneath it all is the idea that race is difference. This whole idea that racial construction sort of limits and advantages different ethnic groups. I meet all these different people (from around the world) and they are so not the stereotype – and I came to Detroit with all my stereotypes intact. I grew up in a white middle class suburb on the Hudson River. My schooling was at predominantly white private institutions. My parents afforded me entry into this larger community, into the dominant culture, and I grew up in what, I now realize, was a very amazing, fortunate situation. The language of being white was not unfamiliar. What I found as I got older was that whiteness was something different than to speak the words and that there's a different kind of insight and lack of insight that goes along with it, as in every culture. As I got older, I had the basic construction of language down, and that's an entry point. If you can't write, if you can't read, if you can't use the same syntax, then no one's going to respond to you. What I found was that though my knowledge of English painting, and not just the painting, but the manners and class system – the culture at large – is the basis of American culture. There's a discreet line there. Prince Charles is as much an American prince as yours.

English art is a little bit less threatening than French art and it's never been considered quite as good. American art, until the fifties, was similarly

encumbered. Before abstract Expressionism, Americans were always trying to be as good as the French, but hating themselves for it.

Yes, but culturally England has always held more sway over America. That's why we are so obsessed with royalty. We want the approval of the ruling classes. And black people, my God, we're the most class-oriented people there are. We use skin tone. How arbitrary a thing can you use? The lighter a black person, the higher up he is considered in the main stream of black culture. The *Philadelphia High Yellow* was the beginning of the black aristocracy. They had their own resorts, their own educational system and their own codes. We're made in the images of our makers - meaning Africans and white Americans.

There's no pressure on white artists to paint like white artists – there's no pressure on white artists to paint like anything. Does it annoy you that there's this supposition that you have to paint like a black artist?

I'm in this very strange place. On one level, because I can speak the language, and I'm an outspoken person, I have always been given permission by white culture. But it took me a long time to realize that blackness is a gift, not just a dimension of who I am! My status in the art world comes from my proximity to white culture.

You can only control your imagery so much; are you ever embarrassed by your paintings?

Constantly. I'm totally embarrassed by them. I don't think I'd be a decent painter if I weren't. I had a one man show when I was seventeen. We sold out the show. People loved the work, but they never talked about it. "It's nice," they said, "young, gifted and black..." Now, back to your shed and make some more things." It was only when my work became a complete embarrassment to me that people (former patrons) started to despise me. When I arrived in Minneapolis I started to challenge my notion of what constituted good painting. I started using different materials – found objects – vivid color patterns – much more garish than anything now – stuff reflective of the punk music scene in Minneapolis. I'd use glitter and tar and pizza boxes.

How truthful were those paintings?

They were part of that Minnesota folk art tradition – using outsider materials. Everyone whispered in my ear, "Take the politics out!" They made it known that they weren't interested in my screaming liberal, militant stances. So I edited out everything.

You became a decorative artist?

There I did. It was only when I went to graduate school in Baltimore and when I came here that it changed.

It's taken you a long time to get over that.

Sure. You buy into a belief system. It was predicated not on success, but on being the outsider. I thought, why go against truth, by which I mean the norm: the firm tradition of the chaos of American abstraction. So, I thought, I don't have to have talent, I don't have to think about the work, all I have to do is make it look like something. It was only coming here that that changed.

Yes. Your paintings now look very factual.

Absolutely... very factual.

So how do you stop them from being illustrative?

I don't. It's like looking at Daumier - his caricatures of drunkenness and death. His lithographs are amazing.

So it's not the Norman Rockwell version of the American Dream. Is it Peter Williams' American Nightmare?

It's definitely lowbrow humor, like the comics of R. Crumb and tasteless Playboy cartoons - not so tasteless now, looking back on them. If you look at contemporary American painters who deal with a similar representation: John Currin, Lisa Yuskavitch, painters who use that kind of bimbo, cartoon oriented imagery, they too were influenced by lowbrow culture and that kind of awareness that goes with Gidget and all that teen stuff back then.

Ultimately, who are these paintings for?

Well, they're a catharsis. From all these dialogues I'm having, I'm realizing that I'm going through a kind a review of what's made Peter Williams. I'm laying it all bare. I'm allowing myself to be someone that a striving middle class family couldn't allow to exist. I'm examining all those neurosis.

You mean interior things. What about things on the outside? In many ways these paintings are a reflection of a decadent society.

Again, the work is a reflection of two worlds. There's the contemporary world and then there's the great tradition of Western Art upon which all good painting finds its basis. Look at Hogarth - the first great English painter - the first English artist to challenge the prevailing continental standards found in the work of Holbein, Rubens and Van Dyke. Hogarth's discourse was entwined with the newly established English middle class's need to define itself, and this is what he satirized so perfectly. In my own work, I

am trying to get the public to pay attention to the competing complexities of contemporary black life and style. For decades we've been a kind of surrogate for any discussion about American culture, whether it be sexual or political or anything else, and I am attempting to make paintings that are similarly entwined, but with a modicum of Rococo indecency! **Cultural icons are an important aspect of your work. In fact your paintings are incredibly iconoclastic. How do you think America views black people, iconically speaking?**

The black woman is viewed as this exotic, overheated being. The black male is seen as the basketball playing buck. And played out every night on television we have all these silly *step and fetch* it characters and we're protesting all this other stuff - protesting someone calling someone the "N" word. There's a dichotomy there that isn't representing what's going on - a state of denial and confusion and a lack of clarity. That's why the community suffers so much; people aren't willing to be clear about what's going on. Other ethnic groups have a clear orthodoxy and a clear cultural commitment. I'm not proposing that any of that go on in the black community because I'm not a conservative person, but the first thing we've got to figure out as a people is what isn't black, what doesn't define black. In the end, what we may define as blackness is something that's far more open and accessible to people. If we know that *step and fetch* It isn't black, then what the hell are we doing watching Martin Lawrence on Saturday night, playing the same roles as half a century ago? When we look at what we pass off as *Houseparty II & III*, its Moms Mabley, Mantan Moreland, Slappy White and Godfrey Cambridge in drag in the nineties and the year 2000.

So your paintings...

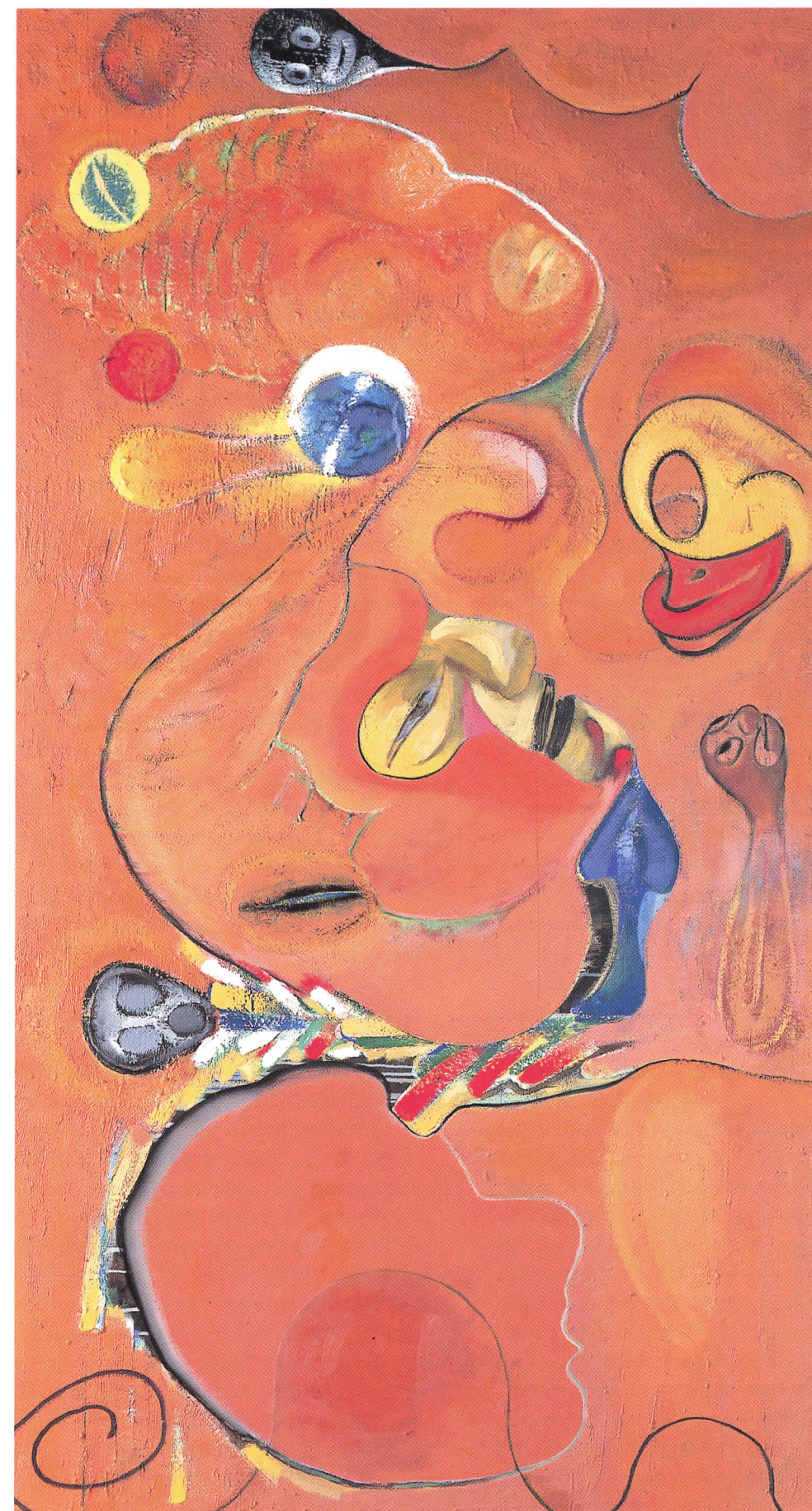
They're a wake-up call I hope.

They're showing a pre-existing condition.

I want to show that black people's lives are very complex and not simply defined as a stereotype. I want the world to understand that human history comprises people migrating, travelling and interconnecting, and that multiculturalism isn't a twentieth or twenty-first century phenomenon, it's human history.

You've spent a fair amount of time experiencing that sort of multiculturalism. When you're in Europe, do you feel differently about being a painter?

I feel differently about being a person. First of all I don't speak the language and a lot of information



Tang, 2000, 46" x 85", oil on canvas

gets filtered out. I'm not listening for the same old stuff. I don't go into a restaurant or grocery store thinking, if I buy this or get that, uh-oh, they're going to think this of me because of this or that. I feel as if I can go anywhere.

One feels a sense of release?

I feel like a child – anonymous in a way. It's only when I open my mouth, when they find out I'm American that the offensive remarks begin. But I think black Americans, as opposed to black Africans, are greatly respected. We have a certain cachet.

How much of what you do in your work is accidental?

At this point I would say it's not so much accidental, it's more that I can't go as far as I anticipate.

What's stopping you?

Skill, talent, invention... I get lost in my paintings and I can't go further. I know there's something further out there, but I can't quite define it or articulate it. If I can't articulate it in some fashion, I have to find a way into that place. If I can't, I'm stuck. It comes down to maturity again. If I could paint every day throughout the year, I would solve a lot of those problems.

Has the process of maturation developed your moral compass?

Yes. There's the public artist and the private artist. I conceal my private thoughts with symbolism. I'm conscious that my moral compass has a sense of the boundaries.

The boundaries are very clear. As a Professor of painting they're quite concrete, as a painter they become blurred.

Absolutely.

What are the forces that blur and influence your personal morality?

I evolved a personal theory - a personal belief system. Part of it's tied to racial construction, part of it to gender or sexual construction. And those two areas overlap. The black male has always been feared because of what he might do with a white woman. The black woman has been utilized as a disposable condom by the dominant culture. And there's the white male in the shower room looking at you to see if he competes. I mean what's that got to do with anything? These kinds of jokes and inferences are pathetic. And look at Black memorabilia!

As far as one's moral compass is concerned, there's a sense of public decorum, a sense of decorum amongst one's friends, and a private sense of decorum. In your painting, which is a public

medium, is decorum like a line drawn in the sand?

No, not strictly.

But there are things you wouldn't touch.

Obviously. Several things... child pornography. I can't even talk about it. I find it so repugnant.

But do you think you use sexuality as a subversive device?

Totally.

What's the reason for that?

It's like the race card in my work. It's been there but I edited it out through much of my life because I was not confident about what it was I trying to say. I didn't know if I was talking about it out of inadequacy or politics. Sexual politics, since the sixties has been a dynamic in American life; the feminist movement; the gay movement; the transgender movement – each one of these things removes this veil of uniformity. The more we can get rid of divisions between male and female and all this racist stuff, the more liberated we're going to be. I don't think it's going to happen in my lifetime. It's something that humanity isn't very good at working at. If I take Fragonard and Boucher as role models, they're there... Titian's *Venus*, Goya's *Naked Maja*. I mean, there was always a traditional place where these things were shown. They weren't shown in the parlor, they were shown in the master bedroom. And what's happened in recent times? The master bedroom has now become the living room. Meaning that we do everything publicly - President Clinton in the oval office.

So you're saying that as a truthful reflection of American culture your paintings have an intrinsic moral honesty.

I'm a realist painter. It's the core of what I am. My therapist defined me as the truth seeker. I've lost friends to AIDS. That's a very painful thing - to lose a friend – and you're only in your twenties... that's just too young. AIDS is a worldwide epidemic and no one wants to talk about it. The lie was often the accepted truth - that these things don't exist and these things can't happen – instead of letting people know what's going on. I'm really talking about the life I live which merely mirrors life in general. I want to make life manifest in my paintings. When Goya painted the royal family he expressed his disgust with that tradition of royalty, corruption and wealth in his paintings. You're in the Prado and you're looking at drips at the bottom of the painting. He also painted the queen mother with a big wart – a huge mole the size of her eyes on the side of her face! He edited out nothing – he was lucky he didn't lose his head over

this stuff.

How do you see painting existentially? Life is a pretty grim business and then you die, et cetera, do you see painting as a game, as a way of making sense of one's ending?

As a way of making sense of it all, but I don't think of it as a game. I've always taken my life very seriously.

Francis Bacon always said that painting was a game for him...

And it was. He made it a game metaphorically and religiously. He played in the casinos every night. He had a racy lifestyle that personified gamesmanship. It was part of who he was. Part of who I am is - I don't use my morals to defend lies and half-truths. What I hope I do is open up our culture to the insight that I have. If it's about racism or ageism – for example, I paint myself, the older male – I have a leg missing – handicapped. I try to paint what I know to be true. What appears to be visionary in my painting is really an interpretation of what I'm encountering on the street. I'll tell you a story. When I first got here, one day I was in Grand Circus Park and a mad woman was walking around the park, and on each spin around the park, she shed a piece of clothing. It was a particularly windy day, so her blouse, caught by the wind, moved up thirty feet in the air and was blown down the street. Over the course of two or three minutes, as she's doing this spin around - talking to herself, shedding her clothes - people are driving by, everyone's oblivious, no one's rushing out to stop her, and she's completely naked. It was the most surrealistic scene that one could possibly imagine on such a predictable day. In my paintings, out of the corner of my eye, I see and experience more than most people who put blinders on. I see it every day. I mean, I've had the personal experience of someone driving me off a cliff. And I survived (having lost a leg).

When you paint, do you work in total silence?

No. My life is not totally silent. I talk to myself. I'm the most eccentric man in Detroit! (laughs) I totally find myself amusing. I'm having a party. I try to play bland music. I put on the most white bread FM station I can find, simply because anything else would be too distracting. I don't have to think about it. If I put on Jimi Hendrix I'm thinking about Jimi Hendrix throughout the whole session.

What are you reading at the moment?

George Elliot – *The Mill On The Floss*.

Why?

I started reading these books when I was in Spain. Conversation is so important over there. My girlfriend wanted to talk till three or four in the morning. Finally I started reading. I was all talked out! (laughs hysterically) "Can't talk anymore, I'm reading honey!" She loved to read these English character novels.

In English?

She'd gone to England as a non-English speaker, learned the language and got her Masters... So I started reading these books. What I like about Elliot is the way she writes about class distinctions within village life. All the different types of people and all the prejudices about class and difference. I'm attracted to that. I'm attracted to England in that kind of way. I like Merchant-Ivory films – *Howards End*, I love that stuff. To me, it's like, what goes on in these people's heads? The first time I read John Updike I finally got what went on in a white person's head. (laughs) I mean, I had no clue up until then. I wondered, is there an inner voice? In the *Rabbit Run* books, there's this middle aged white guy living a kind of revolutionary life, he's left his wife and he's got this Black militant live-in girlfriend. So I'm reading about this guy who's talking about black people and women and sex from an old white guy's point of view. Fascinating! It must be what whites go through when they read about the ghetto. I operate in this world in which white dominance is pervasive. The first lesson I learned from my parents was, "you'd better understand what you're getting yourself into – they'll trap you." They didn't teach me to hate white people, they taught me to honor and respect myself. I realize that now. At the time, I didn't know what they were trying to tell me. If I listened to *Amos and Andy*, and I said, "Holy mackerel!" my mother's hand came from nowhere and slapped me upside the head so fast I didn't know what was shaking. So I had this internal clock built-in. My instincts are very sharp.

You're streetwise.

White streetwise! That's what my paintings are about in a way. I have this sense that I have to make the paintings compete, not with my fellow Detroiters, but compete with the world – whether in Barcelona, England, wherever. I went to Madrid just so I could look at Goya. Then I noticed there was Antonio Lopez Garcia, and while I was looking at Antonio Lopez Garcia, I discovered Zurbaran and Murillo and all these other people. I realized that this quest is all interconnected.

With all this work going on, what do you do to



Alicia, 2000, 24" x 24", oil on canvas

loaf?

Well, (laughs) I'm loafing right now.

When do you decide that a painting is hopeless and you can't go on with it?

I think that paintings are like being handicapped. Sometimes I just think they need a new artificial leg, or a leg to stand on. I will unabashedly deconstruct everything if, in the end, it gives me a good painting. ***You're tenacious.***

I am very tenacious about recomposing and revisiting a painting. What I've learned from that process, and what's beginning, hopefully, to occur in my work, is a quicker understanding of what's already there. I don't really need to revisit so much as I need to understand just what's there. And then I invest more in the process of painting a surface and achieving a kind of pictorial plane that has some kind of liveliness to it. The worse kinds of paintings are just totally boring because they're thin. Thin doesn't mean they're just watery, it means there's no idea about the space or form. They're thin because they don't get the paint to talk to the viewer. All they give you is the thought of the thing they're painting. Paint should have independence from its subject, just as the subject should have independence from the paint.

Do you think that sometimes these paintings have a mind of their own?

Yes.

Like a novel that starts to write itself?

Absolutely. I have no idea where the characters are going. All I have is a kind of thought, an emotional response to what has gone on that day.

Some characters have bad manners, some are grotesque, but because they're truthful they have merit.

It's funny because I have two paintings in museums now, one at the Detroit Institute of Arts and one at the Walker Arts Center in Minneapolis. In my mind they're both very grotesque paintings. The one at the Walker is a history painting called *The Negro Breach*, that's what it's about - the facial masks are caricatures and it's expressionistic - in the way I was when I arrived in Detroit. The painting at the D.I.A. is about my travels abroad. I brought home Goya and Hieronymous Bosch and put them into the painting. No one would want to sit beside the head and travel in the land of that painting. It's offensive, when you first encounter it. It's off putting - it's a Sartre existential moment - it's a confirmation of your own existence. That you are able to be repelled by something, really means that you're alive. So many

people have responded to that painting in a way that overwhelms me. It seems to have a life of its own, independent of me. That's something I'd never encountered before.

A work of art is only a work of art when seen by the public. In the nineteenth century, before Impressionism, artists were not particularly concerned with the general public, they painted for a more elite audience which meant there were restrictions as to what they could paint.

Yes, there were approved classical and religious themes.

Even though Goya painted dowagers with warts and all, for the most part, the artist was at the beck and call of the patron. There were market forces at play. But that's not the case any more. For all intent and purposes, one can paint whatever one wishes.

The Impressionists were bourgeois and upper middle class. Toulouse-Lautrec had a private income - what market forces drove those painters?

Most of the Impressionists had independent means. Van Gogh - no market forces there.

What market forces, if any, drive you?

The kind of market force that drives me is the currency of intellectualism that drove the French Revolution. Would there have been a revolution without the corruption and permissiveness of the intellectual elite?

Do you think that our times are as decadent and corrupt as theirs?

It's startling how often history is merely a repetition of the past. Yes, this is a very decadent time. Like in the fifteenth century we are involved in the decline of the spiritual. I am no different than Bosch in my own participation and awareness and ignorance of it all. At the same time, I want to document all that exists and reveal to the community that it is our time to say something. The local black community is blind to airing this publicly when it's already public. The whites are indifferent and actively promoting this decline because it's profitable. Too often I see my community adopting the same selfish solutions of the dominant culture and satisfying only their lust for power and gain. If you only stay on the surface in my work then you're not getting it. One has to go deep and question my questions and find one's own independence of thinking.

What is going on in contemporary art?

The end of an epoch. We are making objects, icons, deities...

Graven images?



American Cup, 1999, 48" x 60", oil on canvas

Graven images. We absolutely are. Look at Jeff Koons... kind of an interesting artist in a way, but decadent, misogynist and stupid. David Salle – ridiculous, and the world's worse painter. And Eric Fischl, God, who cares!

And Julian Schnabel...

A total wash.

So in the end, what's the point of making art?

It's to struggle through all this. It's to not have all the answers. It's to discover something about yourself, something that isn't so convenient. I often think, what am I doing in Detroit? Why don't I just buy a farmhouse, but then my second thought is, gosh, you'd be bored to death. You couldn't deal with it

past one night. Painting is the greatest western device ever invented, other than musical composition or Russian literary theory, things of that sort. Painting is right up there because it's the one model that consistently reinvents itself, long after it's been presumed dead. Time and again we see artists free themselves from the conventions of their time. Van Gogh, Jackson Pollock - these people were not making paintings that were part of the common currency. Painting has the ability to redefine what you described earlier as the moral compass, to invoke a true dialogue. That's the role of painting.

Recorded in Detroit, June 1, 2000

WHAT

does the artist Peter Williams see when he looks in a mirror? Isn't there a sequence of discovery? First the factuality of the body, the face, the slow emergence of the "self," the palpable figure, locked in the mirror, staring uneasily into its own scrutinizing eyes. And after the certainty of recognition, it's the flagging confidence before its contingent and chance-created mortality, and then the inevitable and comic horror of "oh my god, what is it I have wrought?" And at what point does his blackness become apparent?

The process of looking at who he is and ultimately who we are, is at the center of Williams' new work. Identity politics have always been there, but with a vital new *self-indulgence* there is also a startling clarity of revelation and a tender self-embrace.

Williams is in and all over his new paintings and the metaphoric mirror of the painter is now driven by memory. It is the painter's mercurial poetic space to which he returns again and again to suss out relationships between himself and history, and more important, between his blackness and the conflicted culture around him. He's there as child, man, as lover, as artist, and as multiple hybrid figure composed of various icons from American everyday life. Yet this is not an unconscious ego trip but an exchange equation that demands a reckoning and resolution. There is an exchange that must be met head-on.

In *Dondi* (1999) – a painting named after a 50s comic strip about an Italian war orphan trying to become an American – a black male child, dressed in touchingly familiar pajamas is standing before a magnificent visionary creation: at once a metamorphosing cocoon, a phoenix-like head and face, and a castle. The black child wears a white mask. Around the centrally located vision float butterflies, an African fertility figure, the head of a presumably multicolored, *Africanized Dondi* and a levitating *Pinnocchioized* version of the black child. This vision appears to be fantastically aflame, a phoenix image, and, as if giving life to the vision, the child is pointing toward it or touching it, and waiting to see what emerges. The painting is constructed as a false set or stage, where below the floorboards another frieze-like world exists. There, liminal figures vaguely underpin the visionary narrative above: a mature multicolored black face observes from a corner (reminiscent of the autobiographical black figure in the paintings of Bob Thompson), as intertwining, interracial male legs bespeak some mystery, a black female nude reclines, and a tumbling classic English bus seems to have fallen from the world depicted above.

In *Dondi*, and all his most recent paintings, Williams has found his muse, and its name is Clio, the muse of history, and its dynamo is memory and it is powerful. Williams has traced back to the moment of the creation of self, when the child says, "who will I be? Where will I live?" It is a real moment when we decide who we're going to be and, right then, we start our own construction in spite of the contingencies of the world in which we have to live. In *Dondi*, this charged moment is represented in all of its conflicted brilliance and agony. The child cannot dream of the future without donning the mask of white culture, because the black child has no future of his own, only that which is constructed by, as James Baldwin called him, "the man," white society.

The stage on which this magical moment is designed is a shallow proscenium and powerfully evokes the sense that the child is participating in a drama, more precisely, a classical tragedy. Maybe for Williams the stimulus to remember – the Magdalen cake of memory – is ironically the little toy English bus in the painting. And with that terrible irony Williams ferrets out a moment of a dreamed future, an envisioned identity, a castle constructed,

all viewed from behind a conflicted, masked self. To take hold of the material world, to live in it, the child knows that he will be complicit in a crime against himself and that it must be done with an enflamed consciousness, with full knowledge of the act. That singular and rigorous consciousness is what is behind all of Williams' paintings.

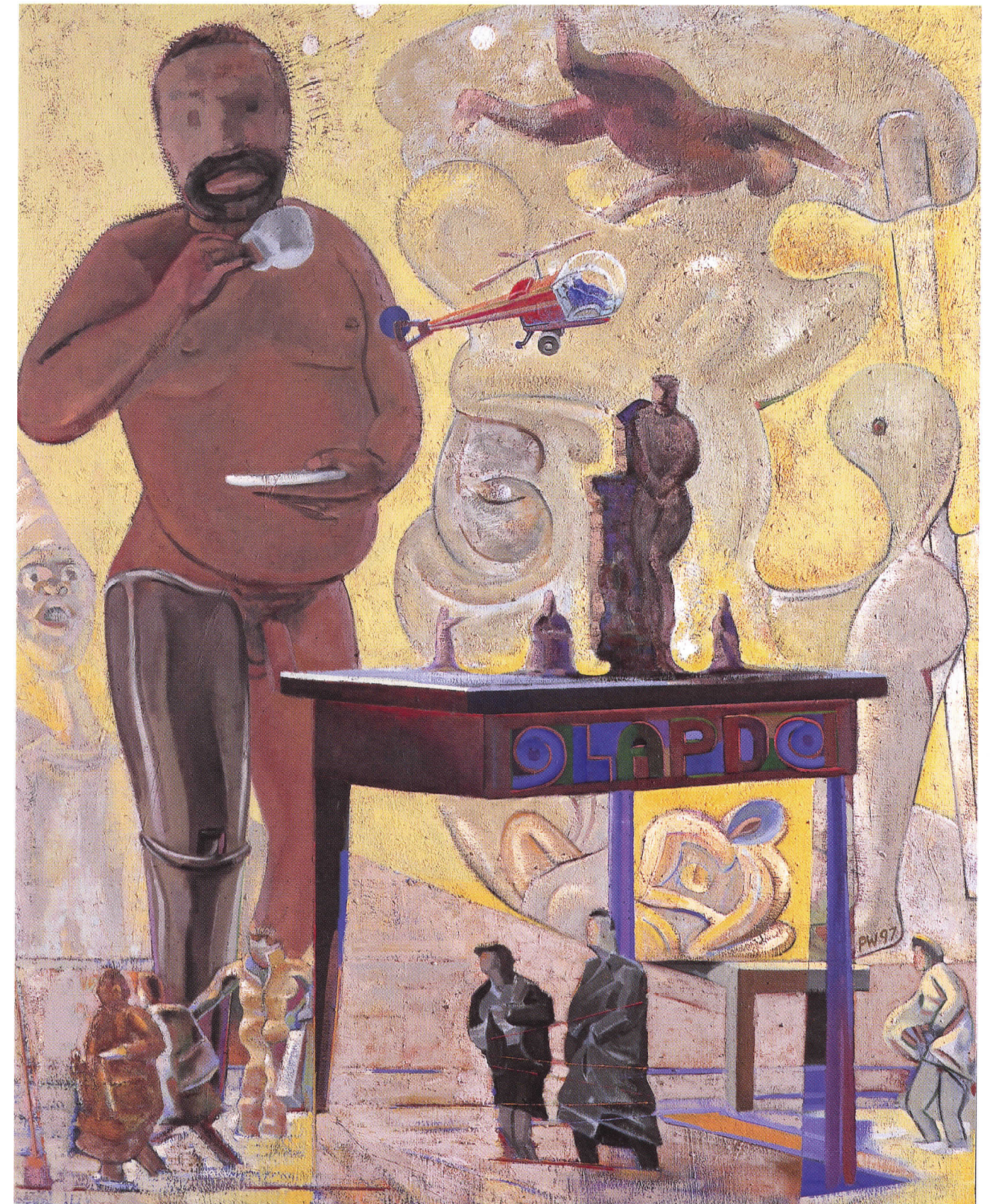
Perhaps the existence of the quaint English bus or a comic strip character, or (in other paintings) a "yellow rubber ducky," or Mickey Mouse, the most pop of white cultural icons, will be a source of amusement and comradeship in the paintings of a black artist. Perhaps seeing the black man behind the familiar armature of the easel will delude the audience into comfort. It is a deceptive comfort for the white audience and an uncanny admission for Williams. He believes in painting as a device for telling the truth, for doing what only painting can do, which is take his world and represent all its unlikely, circumstantial, conflicted, elements in some objective factuality.

In the painting *Studiosite, LAPD*, (1997), a figure that represents Williams stands before us in full nudity. We see him, a black, rounded, muscular body, on his hinged, almost armored artificial leg. It is a painting densely ordered with the construction signs of his own identity. He is standing drinking tea, in a poised English manner, from an almost luminescent white cup and saucer, a three legged table with a sculptural arrangement upon it stands before him, while an amorphous sculptural form containing a familiar Michaelangelian figure occupies the background. An all-observing helicopter floats around him, and before him some police scenario seems to unfold. *Studiosite LAPD* is a delicately articulate statement of the simple facts of a black man's existence. His leg is a fabrication of modern technology and all of the signs that encode or define him are from either the history of Western culture or pop American culture, and yet he still remains, enigmatically, a black man, seldom seen in such a context.

There are many paintings that are hybrid versions of Williams or of characters who represent black participation in various constructions of "white culture." There's *Rat Man* (2000), which reveals the goofy and terrible combination of a *Disney Mouseketeer* and a black who is seen posing for the artist. There is *Down by Night*, (1999), the ultimate construction of Williams' various renderings of the duck. Finally the duck figure, no longer a rubber ducky, is a fully mature, awesome hybrid with portals of sense – eyes, ear and mouth – rimmed in white, but ultimately beautiful and articulate and no longer yellow but brown and remarkably beautiful.

In all of the big narrative paintings, like *Dondi*, *Studiosite*, *LAPD* and *Gene Pool*, (1999), hybrid figures yield radical and frank critiques of the conflicted state of black and white culture. But in the latest paintings, such as *Flower*, *I Gave Myself*, (2000), there is a new narrative compression, revealing the apt use of the narrative style of Diego Rivera, an influence from his tenure in Detroit, in the *Industry* murals at the Detroit Institute of Arts: a condensation of space where there is no longer a shallow stage or foreground wherein the narratives play out, but rather the drama of the black human body as the stage itself, abstracted and folded on itself, becoming a design that links the various passages in the painting together, while suggesting African art.

Williams' paintings, with all their daring blend of personal representations and popular iconography, are disturbingly beautiful. They achieve a sumptuous surface that makes them feel like they aspire to the physical reality of objects. The texture of the background of the Michaelangelo figure in *Studiosite, LAPD* is like a fresco and elicits a sense of belonging to the history of art and the representation of man. And, at the same time, they have a formal integrity that allows each painting to be experienced as a unique invention. The powerful



Studiosite, LAPD, 1997, 60" x 48"

dynamic of personal memory makes for a subliminal connectedness between field and figure, popular icon and the body of the artist. It is not pop-surrealist sensibility that drives this work, a sensibility that is derived from the mainstream audience's ironic perception itself, but a more direct and palpable personal history in which American culture hasn't been cannibalized for sign and symbol, but rather sign and symbol have occurred while plumbing personal iconography. Williams has digested the theater of American culture and unselfishly celebrates the reality of all of our immersion in the brutality of everyday mythologies.

Perhaps the singular mark of Williams' work is the epic consciousness that has borne these works, having to engage – as James Baldwin did in *Another Country* – all of the issues of life lived in the liminal light of a masked identity, in order to paint a picture or represent a conflicted version of his relationship with a dominant culture. In that, he owes his work to a general opening up of black consciousness everywhere, and to the unfettered, *fantastic* and inventive, intellectual and artistic production of African American culture that has emerged from such repressive social conditions. In a Williams' essay on the black painter Richard Lewis, he concludes: "the question of negritude, implicit in his (Lewis') work is all the more apt now, as we move into the millennium, and as whiteness calls forth for its own deconstruction." In other words, while he has himself found the humility and courage to deconstruct the mythologies of his own history, in all of its painful, physical and philosophical fragmentation, what remains to be done on the other side of the equation is a dismantling of the arsenal of a defense system that continues to protect a dark social history of white culture.

Peter Williams' Mercurial Space, by Glen Mannisto

Glen Mannisto is a poet, art critic, and the editor of *Trait: A Detroit Journal of Regional Art and Culture*



Down by Night, 1999, 18" x 22", oil on canvas

PETER WILLIAMS

- 1952 Born in Nyack on the Hudson River
- 1970 Graduated from Nyack High School
- 1969-70 Studied at the Art Students League of New York
- 1970 Studied at the University of New Mexico, Albuquerque
- 1971 Studied printmaking at the Tamarind Institute, Albuquerque
- 1972 Involved in a serious car accident
Loss of right leg, year spent in hospital
- 1975 BFA, Minneapolis College of Art and Design
- 1987 MFA, Maryland Institute of Arts, Baltimore
- Associate Professor of Painting,
Wayne State University, Detroit
- 1992 Study Abroad: Paris
- 1993-98 Study Abroad: Madrid, Seville, Barcelona
- 1996-98 Study Abroad, Berlin, Stuttgart
- Lives and works in Detroit

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 1999 ARC Gallery, Chicago IL, *Decoy*
- 1995 Wayne State University, Detroit MI, sabbatical exhibition
- 1993 Thimmesh Gallery, Minneapolis MN
- 1992 Willis Gallery, Detroit MI,
- 1990 Urban Institute for Contemporary Arts, Grand Rapids MI
- 1989 Michigan Council for the Arts, Detroit MI
- 1985 St. Cloud State University, St Cloud MN
- 1984 Barry Richard Gallery, Minneapolis MN, James Olson/Peter Williams
- 1981 Barry Richard Gallery, Minneapolis MN, James Kielkoph/Peter Williams
- 1975 Minnesota Afro-American Cultural Center, Minneapolis MN
- 1974 Stevens Ave. Gallery, Minneapolis MN, James Kielkoph/Peter Williams
- 1972 Mission Gallery, Taos NM
- 1970 Merenstein Gallery, Nyack NY

GROUP EXHIBITIONS:

- 2000 Paint Creek Center for the Arts, Rochester MI, German Art / Michigan Art
Revolution Gallery, Ferndale MI, Holiday
Tufts University, Boston MA, *Looking Forward, Looking Black*
Georgia State University, Atlanta GA, *LF, LB*
Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art, Scottsdale AZ, *LF, LB*
Yager Museum, Hartwick College, Oneonta NY, *LF, LB*
Momenta Art, Brooklyn NY
- 1999 Center for Creative Studies, Detroit MI, *On the Verge of Abstraction*
Paint Creek Center for the Arts, Rochester MI, *Body and Soul*
Weatherspoon Art Gallery, University of No Carolina, *LF, LB*
Houghton House Gallery, Hobart and Wm Smith College, Geneva NY, *LF, LB*
Elaine L. Jacob Gallery, WSU, Detroit MI, *LF, LB*
Alley Culture, Detroit MI, *Confetti*
Detroit Contemporary Gallery, Detroit MI, *Naked*
- 1997 Revolution Gallery, Ferndale MI
- 1996 Cranbrook Art Museum, Bloomfield Hills MI
- 1995 Detroit Institute of the Arts, Detroit MI, *Interventions*
University of Michigan, Ann Arbor MI, *Disabilities*
- 1994 Concord Gallery, Butcher Art Gallery, Athens WV
Thimmesh Gallery, Minneapolis MN
Buckham Gallery, Flint MI, *The Figure Show*
Center Galleries, CCS, Detroit MI
Detroit Artist Market, Detroit MI, *Inside / Outside*
- 1993 Art Expo, Thimmesh Gallery, Chicago IL
Suomi College, Houghton MI,
Paint Creek Center for the Arts, Rochester MI,
- 1992 Thimmesh Gallery, Minneapolis MN
- 1990 Intermedia Arts, Minneapolis MN
- 1989 Northern Illinois University Gallery, Chicago IL
Henry Ford Community College, Dearborn MI
- 1987 Broadway Gallery, Detroit MI, *MIX*
- 1985 North Dakota Museum of Art, Fargo ND
Daedalus Gallery, Minneapolis MI

1983 MCAD, Minneapolis MN, McKnight Fellowship Exhibition
 1982 Barry Richard Gallery, Minneapolis MN
 1979 *Artists Initiative*, Minneapolis MN
 1978 Minnesota Afro-American Cultural Arts Center, Minneapolis MN
 1976 Metropolitan Community College, Minneapolis MN
 1975 Normadale Community College, Normandale MN
 1970 Mission Art Gallery, Taos NM
 National Arts Club, NYC NY
 1969 Merenstein Gallery, Nyack NY
 Afro-Arts Gallery, White Plains NY
 Woodstock Music Festival, Bethel NY
 Roundtable Gallery, Nyack NY

AWARDS: Honors, Grants

2000 Outstanding Graduate Mentor, Wayne State University
 1997 Excellence in Teaching Award, Wayne State University
 1997 Humanities Fellowship, Wayne State University
 1996 Mercedes Benz Project – International, Detroit, Barcelona, Frankfurt
 1989 Michigan Council for the Arts
 1989 New Initiatives in the Arts
 1985-87 Ford Foundation
 1983 McKnight Foundation
 1975 Who's Who Among American College Students
 1975 Ethel Morrison Vanderlip Award, honorable mention
 1969 Woodstock Music Festival, 2nd place painting

COLLECTIONS:

2000 Walker Art Center, Minneapolis MN
 1998 Detroit Institute of the Arts
 1993 Dayton Hudson Foundation
 1987 Henry Ford Community College

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

1988 *Detroit Focus Quarterly*, Summer, interview by Roberta Litwin and Sandra Yolles
 1995 Ann Arbor News, *Dis/abilities*, Slussen Gallery, review, June, 1995
 The Detroit News, *Interventions*, DIA, review, June 2, 1995
 The Detroit Free Press, *Interventions*, DIA, review, June 4, 1995
 Ann Arbor News, *Interventions*, DIA, review, June 17, 1995
 Metro Times, Detroit, *Interventions*, DIA, review, July 12, 1995
 1996 New Art Examiner, Chicago, January, 1996
 1999 Looking Forward Looking Black, Hobart and William Smith Press,
 edited by Jo Anna Isaak, essay by Peter Williams entitled *Class Reunion*

EIGHT NINE SIX

Eight Years Nine Months Six Hours

A Retrospective of Paintings By
Peter Williams

CONTRIBUTORS

To the Exhibition:
**Oakland University Diversity Programming
 &
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CATALOGUE

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 &
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MEADOW BROOK ART GALLERY

Dick Goody, Director
 Jacky Leow, Assistant to the Director

THE CATALOGUE

Dick Goody, Catalogue Design
 Andrea Eis, Design Consultant
 Tim Thayer, Photography



