

DIDIER WILLIAM

Curtains, Stages, and Shadows

Act 2: Anna Zorina Gallery

October 11- November 24, 2018

Opening Reception: Thursday, October 11, 6-8PM

Anna Zorina Gallery is pleased to announce Didier William in *Curtains, Stages, and Shadows*, a dual exhibition presented in conjunction with James Fuentes.

Exhibition essay written by Jerry Philogene, Ph. D., Associate Professor in the American Studies Department at Dickinson College, Pennsylvania.

Didier William's most recent body of work, *Curtains, Stages, and Shadows* -- as well as the title of this exhibition -- explores the relationship between the formal tensions and the narrative capacities of painting. A series of large-scale mixed-media paintings replete with bold decorative patterns and cut through eye-shaped forms insist on a beauty and a sensuality that is almost audible and in the realm of the haptic. The titles of the pieces appear in Haitian *Kreyòl*, unapologetically, with no English translations or subtitles. Inspired by memories of growing up in a resilient yet vulnerable Haitian community in Miami and coming of age when black and brown immigrant bodies have come to symbolize precarious living, William created these mixed-media pieces as pictorial rather than narrative. As with most of his works, the body takes center stage, literally and figuratively. For William, the recurring motif of the stage evokes the unsettled sensation of immigrant life in the diaspora. There is always a performance to be "Black", a performance to be "West Indian" or "Caribbean," and a performance to *pale angle kòrèkteman*. Consequently, for *Kreyòl*-speaking immigrant people, Blackness, Caribbeanness, and language competence are cultural markers that are in constant negotiation to determine belonging. The paintings highlight a deep sense of vulnerability, yet their aestheticization is marked by a desire for deeper and more complex thinking of how to transcend such vulnerability and become inherently provocative.

There is a tension in the works: a certain yearning to go against the constructs of the limiting everyday coupled with a hopefulness that longs for a different possible future. In *Nou Tout Ansanm*, the urban eccentric landscape of the global Caribbean city that is Miami coalesces within the familiar conventionality of painting. The black and blue curtains that descend over the suspended bodies are reminiscent, for William, of the blue plastic tarps that covered the booths of *Ti Mache*, an outdoor flea market held in Opa-locka, Miami Dade County. The booths were operated by Haitian men and women who sold sundries and food goods that they had procured from Haiti. *Ti Mache*, William remembers, was a space that was "packed with Haitians at their most Haitian. Nobody was trying to acquiesce to anything or change their behavior...a place where everyone spoke *Kreyòl*."¹ While this sense of community and of a shared identity is suggested in the title of the piece, the groundlessness of the bodies reminds the viewer of the destabilizing and precarious nature of immigrant living. An intentionally imprecisely drawn shadow of the figures graces the stage floor, hinting to the presence of unrecognizable bodies teetering between an untethered space where light is obstructed by an opaque object. Images of machetes grouped together form a decorative configuration in the background, perhaps alluding to a vanishing tradition of *tire machèt*, a martial art still practiced in parts of Haiti. Drawing on personal memories, William visually articulates the complex social dynamics of contemporary immigrant urban living.

¹ Interview with artist, July 13, 2018.

ANNA ZORINA GALLERY

533 WEST 23 ST NEW YORK NY 10011 TEL 212 243 2100

Ou ap tonbe, men m ap kenbe ou displays a curtain fashioned in abstract shapes with vibrant reds, oranges, yellows, greens, and blues. A standing figure balances preciously on the edge of the stage; a kneeling figure braces the figure with a hand. Our eyes are forced to look at bodies at odd angles that bend, float, and stand straight while swirling carved lines form borders around these vibrating bodies. Through compositions like these, William creates a metaphoric language out of images. There is a deliberate intention to fashion the body into a language, so that its corporeality speaks a language that references both medical anatomy and art history. While there is no clear narrative visible in the works, we have instead beautiful allegories pregnant with memories long forgotten and stories never spoken. Look closely at the kaleidoscope-patterned curtains and at the shadows on the stage and you will see their refusal to be hidden, to proclaim their existence and offer an aesthetic refusal and resistance to silence and absence.

These compelling works reconfigure the dynamics of the gaze. The cut-through eye-shaped muscular figures embody the authoritative tensions among *looking at*, *being looked at*, and *looking back*, intrepidly shifting the subject/object power dynamic. They encourage an active *seeing* experience, one that reveals the struggles that are tirelessly fought by those who live courageously at the margins and who constantly attempt to obliterate those boundaries. Moreover, the *looking at/back* experience is not simply occurring on the part of the viewer. Explicitly, by their presence, these eye-shaped bodies bestow upon the viewer a cross between a defiant look and a dismissive seeing, one that Haitians refer to as *kout je*: a sharp side-eye that at its boldest and most direct evokes the presence of bodies that were denied the right to look back.

These paintings draw our attention to the provocative interstices made by the encounters among distinctive shapes, lines, forms, and colors. Thus, the method of looking is different. It needs to be decidedly haptic. It needs to be deliberately engaging. It needs to be mindful of the resonances created at the points of encounter between the composition of painting, the materiality of printmaking, and the precision of drawing. It is in this context that we can understand William's work. The paintings capture the essence of power, sensuality, and presence while not shying away from the challenges hidden in the shadows.

These non-gendered, non-racialized bodies strikingly document an almost intuitive sense of resilience and profundity, visualizing universal elements of the human condition that are without regard for race, sexuality orientation, or gender identity. We may be mesmerized by the beauty of their sensuous shape, but we are also transfixed by their shadows as they appear on the vividly-colored and patterned curtains, share the stage, and dwell on the ornate, painterly abstract backgrounds. Sinewy lines, seemingly frenetic curvilinear marks, guide our eyes to the ways in which William balances suggestive abstract sensibilities with expressive organic qualities. It is in this context that William's recent work captivates us, through the haptic that suggests movement, color, form, and, most importantly, a harmonious sensuality. His mixed-media works possess a compositional logic that examines how painting and printmaking energetically coalesce on the surfaces of the panels. In these decidedly detailed-oriented works, William explores the role of painting and printmaking as processes that intertwine the hand with the mechanical. We can almost feel the reverence for the materiality generated by vivid areas of color and a meticulousness of line. This cross-disciplinary expertise allows the viewer to relish in his deft control and skill in emotive mark making. The works gathered in this exhibition provide further demonstration of the wonder and ingenuity of William's unique visual harmony and compositional dynamism.

For any further information, please contact Marie Nyquist at 212-243-2100 or via email at marie@annazorinagallery.com.