



RECENT WORKS Peter Williams

2010 february 26 through march 24, clough-hanson gallery, rhodes college, memphis, tn



Untitled

2009

Mixed media on paper

14" x 11"

The collection of works gathered for Peter Williams's exhibition at Clough-Hanson Gallery is an extension of this artist's thirty year practice. For nearly two decades Williams taught at Wayne State University where he was a mainstay of Detroit's art community. While there he observed Detroit's particular socio-economic climate and what the artist describes as "a harsh life of poverty and its racist infrastructure."<sup>1</sup> In Detroit, one of the nation's most dramatically segregated cities, the artist carefully observed the nuances of society's injustices. Art writer Vincent Carducci describes the work during this time (from 1984 to 2004) as combining "the tactics of deconstructing the popular iconography of racist oppression and appropriating the conventions of European artistic representation" in an effort to "interrogate dominant culture to reveal its role in forming personal and social identity."<sup>2</sup> Since moving to Wilmington in 2004 to take a position at the University of Delaware, the artist's perspective has shifted slightly. While he is a man who still feels like a Detroitian, and not yet like a Delawarean, his practice remains consistent. He uses collage and paint as a way of processing exterior influences and stimuli to rework them, in order to achieve some kind of understanding with his own parallel, interior struggles.

Rather than turn his keen eye towards his immediate periphery, the artist has instead turned his gaze inward. An African-American who is a large man and an amputee, the artist is now approaching his sixties; his work is that of a man dealing with his body's own weaknesses and vulnerabilities. For Williams, a painter's painter, the materials have always been critical to his investigation of the world around him. The scumbled layers of dry-brushed pigment and the pentimenti of scraped surfaces reveal Williams's lengthy process of wrestling an image into being. This evidence of the painting's tumultuous history is analogous to the way the artist labors with the issues he is addressing. In *Plato's Cave* we see the accumulation of dozens of studio sessions that occurred over the course of months as the artist added something here, blocked out an area over there, slowly coaxing the dizzying image along. The smaller paintings in the exhibition from the *Green Zone Series* appear to be a way for the artist to think about not only the safe-area in war-torn Iraq but also his new life in suburban Wilmington. The figures' features are bent and distorted in ways that are at once comic and horrific, alien

yet familiar. The audience could view the disfigured heads and faces as a way for the artist to realize his internal struggle of assimilating into a new life.

Williams employs a variety of visual tropes to render the different parts of his dense paintings. Flat, geometric passages are combined with painterly, cartoon figures. Some areas might be executed with intensely colored pointillist dots, while of sections others are traditionally rendered. Additionally, some areas are stunningly virtuosic in their delivery while others might carry the brutal urgency of a child's first painting. This constant shifting on the part of the artist speaks to his desire to address his myriad influences and his need to present a multivalent approach to story-telling. The piecemeal approach to building his images led to the process of making his newer, layered collage drawings on paper. The collage elements, culled from books, newspapers and magazines, allowed the artist to find new ways to broaden his available visual vocabulary while working on a small, intimate scale. As with the varied application techniques in his paintings, the individual collaged bits in his drawings - no matter how small - bring their own specific history and particular associations that add to the viewing experience. Within the stacked maelstroms we find hand-drawn elements paired with the face of Beetle Bailey's Sergeant Snorkle, a diamond-encrusted gangsta grill, a great "FWOOSH," and a variety of architectural elements cut from the funny papers. These blastulas of undifferentiated cartoon parts feel compressed to a point of critical mass just moments pre- or post-eruption.

Peter Williams's exhibition gives the audience a glimpse into the most recent period of this exceptional artist's life. While his perspective is inherently specific to his personal experiences, the rich work is not exclusive to a particular race or political point of view. This carefully nuanced work remains inclusive, allowing the viewer to find his or her own point of entry. In doing so the artist's extraordinary paintings accomplish the very difficult task of providing appropriately layered insights into our tumultuous and complicated common history.

Hamlett Dobbins  
Director, Clough-Hanson Gallery

<sup>1</sup> Williams, Peter. "Turbulence." *Peter Williams: Artistic Repair*, Visual Arts Center of New Jersey, 2007: 2.

<sup>2</sup> Carducci, Vincent. "Peter Williams: Black Humor," *New Art Examiner*, Nov-Dec 2001: 66

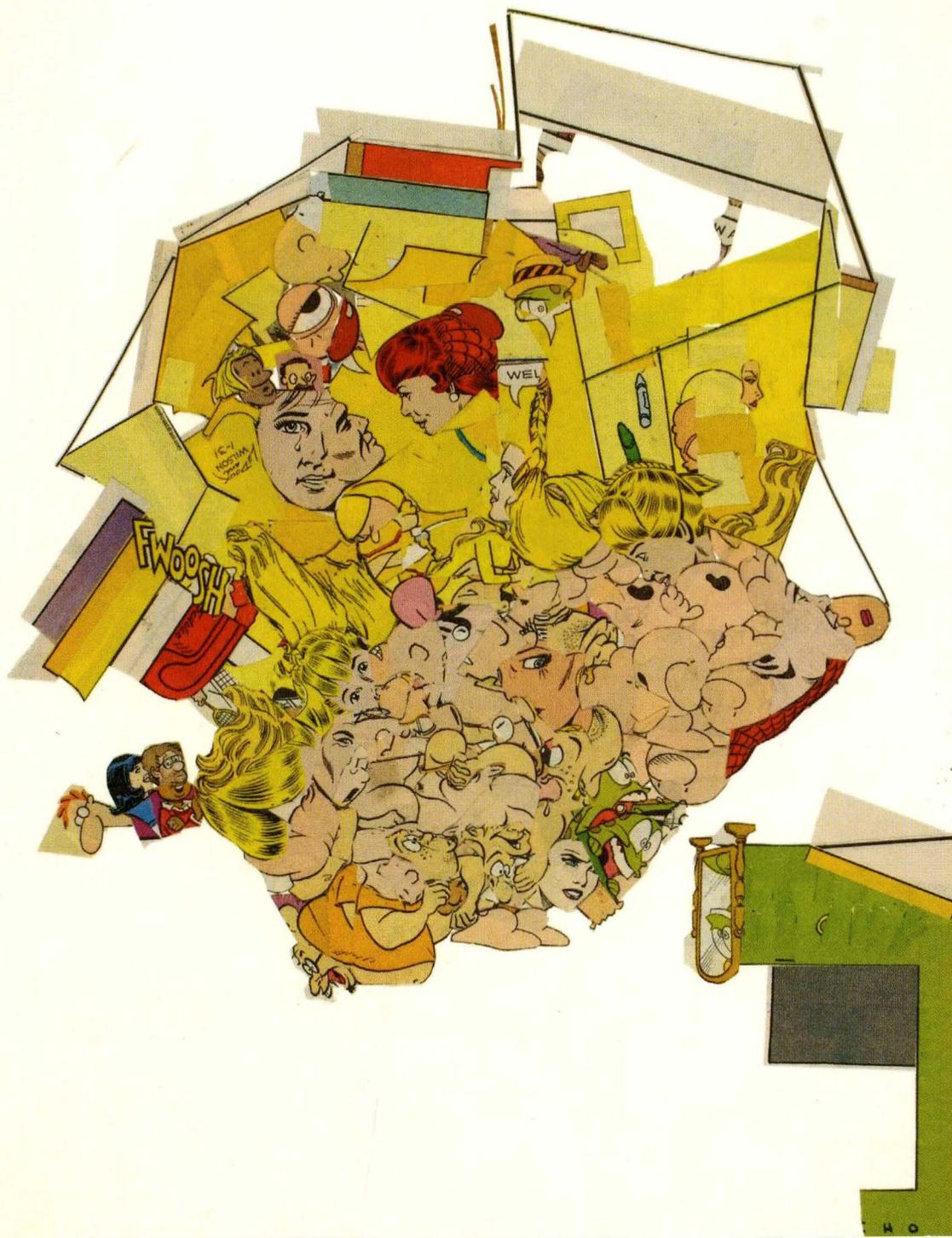


*Dr NO*

2009

Oil on canvas

30" x 24"



Untitled

2009

Mixed media on paper

14" x 11"



*Plato* 2009, Oil on panel, 38" x 38"



**Rhodes College**  
—1818—

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Cover Image: *Plato's Cave*, 2009, Oil on canvas, 48" x 60"  
All images are courtesy the artist.