A Haitian Artist’s Mesmerizing Eyes

Didier William’s slithery forms surge forth and recede within a sphere of visual gravitas — heaving, throbbing, breathing. Paul D’Agostino
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Installation view of “Didier William: We Will Win” at Tiger Strikes Asteroid New York (photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

It’s easy to say that the paintings in We Will Win, Didier William’s solo exhibit of six rivetingly fresh mixed media works at Tiger Strikes Asteroid New York, are
individually and collectively mesmerizing. It’s easy to say they’re easy on the eyes. It’s also easy to say they’re an eyeful. Instantly captivating, painstakingly inscribed eye-forms, after all, are everywhere to be found in these works. They’ll have you on lock whether you note it or not.

But of course, that’s not quite what I mean.

Mesmerizing, easy on the eyes, an eyeful: I use these descriptors here neither lightly nor flippantly. William’s paintings are indeed an eyeful, and per force, because there is truly so much to look at. The artist’s subtly layered, printmaking-inflected, collage-informed processes, and his palette of abundant flat blacks cut through, sometimes literally, with detailed motifs or swaths of lush reds, blues, greens, and rather gold-seeming oranges and yellows, come into compositional confluence in an overall sphere of gripping visual gravitas. It’s a sphere in which sometimes slithery forms surge forth and recede at once, and in which enigmatic figures manifest and back away. This creates a kind of heaving, a throbbing, a breathing — anxious, calm, abiding.

This sphere of visual gravitas, then, or this visio-emotive, physically palpable if not palpitating setting, becomes a fitting aesthetic vessel for William’s variably embedded narratives and implicit messages pertaining to gendered and raced identities, and to the perhaps ever-unrelenting past-present-tense of still-colonial-post-colonial histories that seem to never fully wane, or to give way to a sufficiently momentous chapter of a thoroughly decolonized, autonomous after.
That said, although William’s palimpsestic, built-up surfaces lend themselves very well to modes of conceptual dismantling, the artist’s aim is not necessarily to reference or inspire theoretical constructs or prescriptions related to his upbringing in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. Readily conveyed in his sieve of suggestive imagery,
rather, is a vision in which certain molds shaped by certain histories are significantly cloven if not fully broken, and in which the ambiguous, fluidly patterned identities emerging therefrom are as malleable as their circumstances are vicissitudinous.

This does not imply, however, that such compositional identities, individual as well as collective, do not also rebuke and resist, and effectively so, and writhe and teem, observe and critique. Once again, these paintings do seem to heave, throb and breathe. Indeed, one piece in particular, *Godforsaken Asylum* (2017) — a work that literally carries the exhibit’s title without actually sharing it — also speaks in what starts as a visual whisper, then turns the volume all the way up until the viewer can’t *unhear* it. Another trenchant piece, *Ma tante toya* (2017), speaks revolutionary volumes of its own by swapping out a historically piquant little piece of French cutlery for an imposing machete *à la haïtienne*.

Formal gravitas, palimpsests, allegories: I suppose that’s a lot to attribute to the expression ‘an eyeful.’ Perhaps better would be ‘meta-visually loaded.’ But what makes the works an eyeful also makes them mesmerizingly easy on the eyes.

And so, ‘mesmerizing’? Perhaps better would be immediately, utterly enthralling. And ‘easy on the eyes’? Better yet: rapturous, ravishing.

No matter which might be the most applicable descriptors, William’s paintings in *We Will Win* are many things, and they lure you in and lock your gaze — all those eyes, and those eyes, and those other eyes again — in many ways. They respire airs of aching grace and allegorical mystery, and they furnish, in their visually malleable beauties, a wealth of things to look at, and a whole lot to consider.

Consider, for instance, the following: Nothing is easy to say, but something must be said. This notion is always and everywhere timely.

*We Will Win* continues at Tiger Strikes Asteroid New York (1329 Willoughby Ave, #2A, Bushwick, Brooklyn) through November 19.