

eric firestone gallery

Peter Williams (b. 1952, Nyack, New York; d. 2021, Wilmington, DE) made paintings that exist in the space between seductive beauty and abject horror—evoking the complex experiences of Black Americans in the contemporary age. Williams began painting as a teenager before receiving his BFA from the Minneapolis College of Art and Design, and his MFA from the Maryland Institute College of Art. At the age of seventeen, Williams presented his first solo show at Pat Merenstein Gallery in his hometown of Nyack, NY, which precipitated more exhibitions in the region (including one at the Woodstock Music Festival).

Often humorous and disturbing at once, the artist's canvases reflect Black history and his own life events. Williams took up subjects ranging from police brutality and mass incarceration, to the celebrities and places that inhabited his imagination. Populating his kaleidoscopic compositions are countless characters from Disney movies and comic books as well as icons from across American visual culture.

Coming of age during the Pop art movement, Williams as a teenager would take road trips to visit museums and galleries showcasing its reigning practitioners. Critics have connected his punk-pop style with Peter Saul and his revisionist history painting with Robert Colescott. Formally, Williams himself described the influence of canonical artists including Old Masters like Goya and early modernists like Kandisky and Klee. He deftly moved between and collided techniques such as geometric abstraction and pointillism while creating his own maverick aesthetic vocabulary.

Against this art historical backdrop, his oeuvre is densely packed with symbols, public figures, and mark-making. Mouseketeer hats, M&M's, and historical minstrel imagery appear alongside heroes of the Haitian Revolution, Colin Kaepernick, and Leon Spinks in dizzyingly rich compositions with saturated, outrageous color. The framing devices on which the artist relied—and particularly his frequent use of the grid—signify various forms of imprisonment and lack of representation: as a Black man, as a wheelchair-user, and as a storyteller entrapped in the legacy of modernism. As critic Angela Carroll has written of his work, "Each painting is a spectacle, a window that peers into an unsettling scene."

The artist's series called the *N-Word* depicts a Black superhero who intervenes in situations of violence enacted on people of color by the police. His *NABA* body of work envisions an Afrofuturist narrative wherein Black people escape from cycles of oppression by traveling to outer space. His paintings defy easy interpretation, as they layer autobiography with a multiplicity of references. His life stories—particularly his early familial history; his periods in Minneapolis, Baltimore, Detroit, and Wilmington; and his car accident as a young man (which resulted in the amputation of his right leg)—coexist with larger historical and contemporary narratives.

Williams was known as a passionate mentor and instructor at the University of Delaware (2004–2020), where he began teaching following a 17-year tenure at Wayne State University. He was

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the recipient of the Artists' Legacy Foundation's 2020 Artist Award and a 2021 Guggenheim Fellowship. His paintings are found in the permanent collections of the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; and the Detroit Institute of Arts, among others. His work was featured in the 2002 *Whitney Biennial* and the 2017 edition of *Prospect New Orleans*. He is represented by Eric Firestone Gallery where he was the subject of a major presentation of work in 2022, *Peter Williams: Nyack*. Williams will also be the subject of the exhibition *Peter Williams: Homegoing - A Call and Response*, opening at the Minneapolis College of Art and Design in August of 2025.

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