

A Conversation with Michael Williams

Dan Nadel

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Dan Nadel: Tell me about the recurring figures and symbols in your paintings. There are some guys with a battering ram, a donkey, a Buddha-like fella, lumpy shoes, and somewhat clueless seeming dudes. I'm wondering about the origins and values of these visuals.

Michael Williams: I make a lot of different drawings and then root through them and the things that get to become paintings get to because of my intuitive feeling about them or because of formal structures in the image that seem complex and interesting to make a painting from. Or, there's something about the meaning of the drawing that, at that moment, makes some sense to me.

DN: What about all of these guys with the big feet?

MW: If you draw a figure and you give them big feet, they're clowns at that point. You're saying, *This person's not really operating based on intellect*. All those forms came out of me cutting figures out of paper, which I found to be very different from drawing. Somehow these images were coming from a different place in my brain than if I had drawn them. And after awhile I realized that they were these deadbeat characters from my generation - the *failure to launch* type. That's who I saw those guys as.

DN: Ok, and what about a figure like Shrek?

MW: Well, I found that I've been drawing Shrek from time to time for a few years. Several years, really. I realized that I must see myself as Shrek in some way. On a bad day I think I see myself as Shrek.

DN: What is Shrek like on a bad day?

MW: Big and goofy and dumb. But visually I do really like the Shrek movies. I also like Bruegel quite a bit and I've always thought that Bruegel rendered people in a similar way to how people are rendered in the Shrek movies. Bruegel's figures always feel like their clothing is part of their skin in the same way that characters from Shrek have their skin and clothing texture-mapped over a virtual skeleton. I saw the Bruegels in Vienna recently at the Kunsthistorisches Museum. You look at those big scenes with all these people, there are 70 people and each person has their own space. There's not much overlapping. If you saw a scene like that in reality you'd think you were going insane. But it's very graphic in the way that each figure gets its own frame. The Medieval period is a favorite era of mine. It's like Europe's old West.

DN: What about the ying-yang symbol that pops up a lot?

MW: Yeah, it started popping up lately. The ying-yang is a cliché, it's cheesy, it's stupid, but at the same time what it symbolizes - interconnectivity, the complementary nature of contrary forces - I believe in those things. So I'm interested in symbols like that. I earnestly believe in the thing but at the same time, it's got this place in cultural connotation-ville that makes it hard to earnestly believe in. It's the same thing in the painting "Goose 9" with the guy wearing a COEXIST t-shirt. When I see the COEXIST bumper sticker I sort of think of the person driving the car as someone who I wouldn't socialize well with. But, obviously I believe in humans co-existing. So, those sorts of troubled symbols are intriguing. There's something about the fact that we find self-righteousness distasteful even when we agree with the message that probably signifies our doom.

DN: So, with that, the ying-yang, Shrek and the shoe, you're kind of wrestling with "*ah, I like it, but I don't like that I like it.*" Or, *my generation stinks but I'm a part of it.* This sort of self-reproach? Is it partly just trying to figure out these philosophical or emotional or psychological questions via these symbols?

MW: Generally speaking, for me making paintings is about trying to figure things out. It's not about trying to say something.

DN: The way I process the paintings, and I'm sure it's different for you making them, is almost cinematic. It's like watching slides being projected one after another or onto one another. You catch one image, you catch another, you catch another, and you catch another because they've blended. So I wondered about the process of layering because the layered paintings are so much about what happens when you go back into these pictorial areas you've created. And there's a transparency that happens that's pretty fascinating. So what is the current physical process for these paintings?

MW: I want to see new things. Layering imagery is a way of getting new things to look at and having things get more complex. It also mystifies the content of the picture. Like looking at paintings through the bushes. When I see paintings the things that excite me are things that I cannot immediately understand - the forensics of looking at painting. I have a lot of general doubts and I think that trait manifests in my paintings in that I'm not too eager to make straightforwardly loud or confident statements.

DN: If I was going to make a really facile statement it would be something like, you started out making really densely layered images in 2006-8, where it was all about the thickly painted image and then gradually those images got more abstract. Then there was the jigsaw puzzle period. Then you stripped it all the way to just the noodle period and now the images have returned. How do you see the change in modes?

MW: There're people that come up to me sometimes and say, *I still remember*

*that painting of the sheep painting the self-portrait.* When you have a painting that's more layered and has more going on outside of the spectrum of representation, it's harder to remember. It's more of an experiential painting. But you can't truly remember a representational painting either you just convince yourself that you can.

DN: Right. What was the defining break for you? Because you've never gone back to just straight-up painted images. I guess there are a couple pieces here and there where you just let the image alone. But you mostly stepped away from it.

MW: Well I don't agree that there was a "break", but the jigsaw paintings that you mentioned, maybe those were a bridge. I was taking pictures - drawings of representational scenarios - and putting them through a process that abstracted them. So it was a way of generating abstract paintings out of representational imagery. From painting to painting you could sort of still see what had maybe been going on in the original image. And then with some other paintings, I was the only person who could really tell what was going on. Those were the ones that were most satisfying for me. There's this thing, being the person that makes the paintings - you're aware of the history of the imagery and you remember having made the painting so you see the paintings very differently than anyone else. I prefer to have that experience of the paintings.

DN: So if there wasn't a "break" do you see a continuum?

MW: The one thing that I would say about all the paintings - in terms of how they've been executed - is that I've set up a framework in which to paint. Even those early paintings, they were all based directly on very small drawings, and I stubbornly wouldn't change forms that were sort of awkward and should have been changed. I used the lines of the drawing as an area to fill in paint. And the paintings are still that way. The images are frameworks in which to suspend color. Everything else can change - and it *is* a sort of continuum - but this way of making the things seems to be a base.

DN: So what is your goal with the paintings? Is there a larger project? Are you trying to solve problems from picture to picture or are you ...

MW: If I have a project it's to keep myself excited about what I'm doing.

DN: Does that worry you? That you'll not be excited?

MW: I can't just keep making the same painting. I think a lot of artists in my generation have a similar thing going on. It's not the 1940s and we don't have some big idea that's very separate from us that we're working on for our whole life. I think that our art is more personal, actually. The art changes because we change as people. If we keep making the same painting that we were making five years

ago, maybe we're going to stunt our psychological growth. We need to keep changing. But, that's selfish. We're a much more selfish generation.

DN: Why is that selfish?

MW: Barnett Newman, there's somebody with a project. It doesn't have to do with him really, it's just this thing that he is doing that's a grand life-long testament, statement, whatever. I don't know, maybe that's selfish too. But for the work to be changing all the time, it has clearly to do with the self. I'm changing, or what I'm thinking about is changing, therefore my paintings change. Another side of it is that we're living in tumultuous times, it's hard to trust anything.

DN: How important is New England to you? Or I should say, geography in general, and hiking...

MW: I love nature.

DN: How does that play into the painting, if at all? Or is it just your mind resting?

MW: I was thinking yesterday that sometimes you hear people say, *that painter's got good instincts*. Or something like that, talking about instinct in painting or in art-making. I like nature because it makes me feel like a human being - in my body and instinctual - and I was thinking about if that's the right word to talk about making art, if we can actually have *instincts* in making art, or if art decisions are something else.

DN: What else would it be besides instinct?

MW: Well, what's instinct? It's supposed to be these things like, whatever, a bird learns how to fly or something. Can you really relate that to, *this color should go next to this color*? Is that still instinct? I think of instinct as being essential things for survival, things we know in the absence of learning. On the other hand we're pretty sophisticated animals at this point so maybe we've developed a more refined category of instincts. But you're asking me about nature and I guess I'm thinking about how I'm often striving to find some sort of natural way of making a painting. I have a lot of systems for making paintings but at the same time I'm always trying to transcend them and to just paint. I really wish I could paint without any filter and have it work out great, but that's never happened for me. It's always been very tactical and process-oriented painting. And I guess I think - if I could make a painting where I just sort of danced into the studio one afternoon, whirled the brushes around, and produced something that was really thrilling to look at - that this would be a more natural way of making, that I'd be more in touch with my animalistic side, and that it would make me happy. It's sort of leftover from AbEx, this idea of just gushing it into the work. But I think it's just a myth.

DN: Yeah. It's the myth of the Romantic artist.

MW: I had this idea for a series of drawings of Native Americans working on cave paintings and deliberating for hours over where to spray the hand or paint the buffalo. The thing is when I'm out in nature, hiking for a few days or something, the last thing I think about is art-making. When I go hiking I often bring a sketch book or a camera thinking that I'll be inspired, and I am always inspired but it's more of an inspiration to not make art. Because painting is an unnatural process.

DN: Yeah. Because now, with these paintings, I guess they really are process-intensive. You're making decisions at every stage. You have to deliberate enough to decide what's going to get printed, then whether or not you paint on it. Do you sometimes know ahead of time that you're not going to paint on top of something that's been printed?

MW: Yeah, I sometimes hope that I won't. I sometimes hope, *this one might have a chance at being a good painting*. But I don't really know until it gets stretched up. I have a lot of patience for thinking up things that I want to see but then I don't always have as much patience for going through the process of making the thing. I think that that works for me. There can be these kind of ambitious ideas for how to make a painting but I'm a little too lazy to do it the right way, so, they're kind of done in a clunky way.

DN: Yeah, I wonder if lazy is the right word or ... you think lazy is the right word? It feels more like a sensibility.

MW: Well I think it's easy to fool yourself into thinking that your taste or sensibility has something to do with things that are external from you. But yes, I guess lazy is a dirty word, maybe casual is more acceptable? The point is that I'm not executing diligently, that's not of interest to me. A mock-up is good enough. The painting can be a recommendation.