

MARCH 2023

Franklin Williams

PARKER GALLERY

“Meditative Spectacle: Paintings 1974–76” picked up where Parker Gallery’s 2017 show on Franklin Williams’s earlier career left off, with the artist, now ensconced in Petaluma, California, honing his richly patterned and labor-intensive constructions in willful disregard of the contemporary scene despite his proximity to it. The prior installment included works Williams made during his student years at San Francisco’s California College of Arts and Crafts—now known as California College of the Arts—when visiting instructor John Coplans disabused him of painting in an Abstract Expressionist key, encouraging the young artist to throw his studio contents off the Bay Bridge to facilitate working on his own terms. (That event may have guided Williams in teaching as a professor at the San Francisco Art Institute, alongside Joan Brown, Bruce Conner, and Jay DeFeo.) In the 2017 presentation were experimental trials from the later 1960s and early ’70s, including collaged-paper abstractions and paintings reminiscent of quilts, as well as sewn sculptures featuring gnomic, quasi-bodily protrusions stuffed with batting that erupt from planar fields. By contrast, “Meditative Spectacle” introduced seven confidently wall-bound canvases, many exhibited for the first time. All of the works on view still bore the artist’s inimitable, exploratory approach, as each composition evidenced multiple, sometimes arcane, treatments that nevertheless belie origins in vernacular craft.

Crochet thread, for one, was a mainstay, used throughout most of the works to attach paper to canvas and, less pragmatically, to festoon surfaces with a kind of uncannily vital fringe suggesting fine antennae, the careful mending of precious items, and sutured wounds. Many of the pieces, even when not literally sewn, similarly recalled the delicate tracery of patternmaking for garments, with individual sections noticeably cut and reassembled to constitute the figure but not necessarily the thing covering it. *Contradiction in Terms*, 1974, one of the two earliest works here, plays with seams: Encompassing four abutting panels—two on top and two below that, at certain points, appear to obliquely mirror one another—the work is a kaleidoscopic fracturing of planes and hallucinatory interference patterns. As did other pieces on view, this canvas jammed together paper, vinyl, and feathers, among other disparate materials, rendering process as the point and Williams’s chief narrative effect. Yet recognizable stuff breaks the optical moiré of *Contradiction*, like the repeating motif of a coiled snake nestled in the petals of white flowers. (Differently memorable were the lobster-red stilettos at the end of can-canning legs that become sloped phalli in *Twins [Pt. 1 & 2]*, 1976). Elsewhere, *Completely Voluntary*, 1974, unnerved in its evocation of a spirit rising from a body, or a corpse being deposited into a tomb.

Completely Voluntary also features handprints: burnt-earth red impressions rimmed with alternating black and white dots, which help to disambiguate the painting’s primarily abstract surface. They also showed up in *Native Truth*, 1975, but were connected to arms and thrust into the air with ecstatic

force. Williams fills scenes with full bodies—outlines of indistinctly gendered forms were actually impressions of his wife, Carol, who appeared traced in shadows and imprints from more direct somatic contact (thus the handprints might have been hers, not his). In interviews with Williams, Carol is a constant presence, and is so, too, in the art for which she has long served as a model. The often human-scaled totems to which she gives rise are still intangible, comprised of flurries of marks contained only by porous yet utterly impervious outlines. In the show’s namesake *Meditative Spectacle*, 1976, a morphing, writhing entity held the center of the composition while being refracted through a prism-like triangle or pyramid that—despite its play with faux-illusionistic recession—still stays flat on the picture plane, where its diagonals bisect a succession of inset frames. *Dissimilar Enough to Require Each Other*, 1975—its spray-painted elements applied to the back of the canvas but visible on the front—acknowledged ornamentation as artifice but also as subtext, or even as support. It might also be a fable of longing, predicated on difference and the mediation that makes recognition not only necessary but possible.

—Suzanne Hudson

Franklin Williams, *Dissimilar Enough to Require Each Other*, 1975, acrylic, paper, vinyl, and crochet thread on canvas, 62½ x 59”.

