

ARTFORUM

CRITICS' PICKS

SUZANNE HUDSON | DECEMBER 2019



Franklin Williams, *Teddy Looking for Professor Emeritus*, 2019, acrylic and collage on canvas, yarn, crochet thread, beads, handkerchief, 40 x 30".

LOS ANGELES

Franklin Williams

PARKER GALLERY
2441 Glendower Ave
October 27–December 21, 2019

Franklin Williams recently retired from the California College of the Arts, where he taught for more than half a century and earned the honorific in this exhibition's title: "The Inimitable Professor Emeritus." The ten fantastic paintings on view are collaged with past work and family mementos (sea shells and a Welsh love spoon among them); dotted with acrylic and so many swarming, glistening beads; laced with cherry-red yarn; and visually pieced together with tight sutures that become dimensional fringe-like extrusions. Several were completed after his tenure at CCA, and they evince his having survived many affiliations already—Funk art, Nut art, Visionary art, Pattern and Decoration, Gaudy art. (One of his pieces from the early 1970s is currently

on view in the show "With Pleasure: Pattern and Decoration in American Art 1972-1985" at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles.)

Williams has worked steadily since the mid-'60s, coaxing from the blankness of a canvas visions of erotic love and irrevocable loss on visually (and sometimes physically) encrusted surfaces. These recent pictures hold those earlier masterworks close, in a way that feels like embodied memory. Many of the newer works are autobiographical—the handkerchief in *Teddy Looking for Professor Emeritus*, 2019, belonged to the artist's mother—but that is the least of it. They are revelatory, and apotropaic. Paint marks and fraying knots wrest biomorphic forms into masks, faces, and bodies. Although the works are often bounded by the representational limits of the picture plane, they are further delineated by optical cues: Their sides are treated as if they might be padded with batting, a self-conscious mnemonic act befitting a memory quilt. A triptych of figureheads cannily named *They Tried to Button Me Down but I Found My Way*, 2019, might likewise prove less retrospective than preemptory.