

flash art

50th Anniversary

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Franklin Williams

Parker / Los Angeles

From Funk art to Nut art to Pattern and Decoration, Petaluma-based artist Franklin Williams has been associated with a wide range of postwar artistic movements that will likely be unfamiliar to contemporary art audiences outside of Northern California, where many of these provincial categories were born. While Williams was included in the eponymous “Funk” show at UC Berkeley Art Museum in 1967, his practice does not quite align with the irony, excess and abject humor of Funk, as his first Los Angeles solo exhibition shows us. Dating from 1963 to 1972, the mixed-media drawings, sculptures and paintings on view display a formal precision and attention to materials that reveal the artist's deep ties to craft and a more buoyant, almost camp, sensuality. The bold planes and lines of Williams's works, whether sculptural or wall-mounted, are often stitched together or formed with beads, sequins, yarn and other tactile embellishments that erupt from the surface. These are things that want to be touched.

The earliest sculptures in the exhibition display a more subdued palette, demonstrating the foundational role of quotidian materials and corporeal motifs in Williams's body of work. Two sculptures from 1964 stand out: *A Thing* is comprised of an iridescent tuber punctuated with red polyps and short, curly hair; the second, an untitled work, involves a cockish, braided appendage bursting out of a decorative box covered in a dirty nylon stocking and stitches — Lee Bontecou meets Joann's Fabrics.

Yet the artist's phallic forms are most resonant when rendered in ambiguous amalgamations. For instance, an untitled painting from 1967 features a grid of crochet thread atop an otherwise flattened scene of biomorphic shapes and frenzied marks, evoking both male and female reproductive organs and microscopic protozoa, all without figure-ground distinctions. While one could approach this orgiastic style as a kind of postmodern pastiche, Williams's nuanced politics can be found in a formal paradigm that persistently complicates binary approaches to difference.

by Olivian Cha