



PROFILES

Rachel Eulena Williams

Orchestrating
ways of concord
through all forms
of making

Words OSMAN CAN YEREBAKAN
Photography IKE EDEANI

Rachel Eulena Williams' multi-part paintings are joined by various acts of making as well as through the gentle concert of a rope. She uses vibrant colors and different cuts of canvases to add layer to her compositions that stand between firmness and lightness. With a balance between density and the negative space, Williams conveys multi-dimensional paintings, urging the viewer to discover her hands-on process.

A connecting tissue runs through each of Williams' sculptural paintings. On the physical end, ropes keep her cuts of canvases and plethora of fabrics intact within wooden panels; metaphorically, however, a sense of togetherness of disparate colors and textures inhabits her detailed compositions. Between an engineered precariousness and energetic solidity, Williams' mixed-media juxtapositions both monumentalize and mystify process—they yearn for closer inspections that brim with material discoveries.





RACHEL EULENA WILLIAMS



“The rope is necessary for holding a moment,” she says at her Brooklyn studio, where stacks of canvases and fabrics join rolls of cotton strings and piled tools. A sewing machine overlooks the gray-hued industrial Bushwick cityscape; color dominates the workspace inside, with pieces of textile laid over a large table next to a book full of sketches. Traits from various gestures of making—painting, cutting, drawing, sewing, screwing, gluing—linger. “This is also a physical act,” adds Williams about the tactile unity she concocts, “because each rope is a line that marks the movement of the body.” Both a utilitarian tool and a bodily chronicler, the thick cotton string journeys through acrylic-painted canvases, occasionally loose and in other times, tightened—along the way, patterned textiles and even pieces of hammocks join.

Williams dissects each material through a surgeon-like precision and merges with a curious whimsy. *In Red, Invisible, Blues*

“A work is both active and static,” thinks Williams, “and a dynamic experience held by ropes can replicate both.”

Tactility and depth inform a practice invested in the decision as much as chance, yielding kaleidoscopic optics and geometric formations. Tension and weightlessness occupy equal estates across positive and negative spaces; ropes sprawl over generous color palettes and splice dense textures.

The 33-year-old artist’s 2023 solo exhibition, *Hair and Body*, at Dundee Contemporary Arts in Scotland featured circular or rectangular paintings. They outlined washes of bright colors that blossomed into depth and texture upon nearing. Through lines drawn by ropes, she wove networks of harmony, of immediate tangibility and of fleeting studio time. Physicality was also an invitation rendered firsthand in her first institutional exhibition. Another swing was installed in front

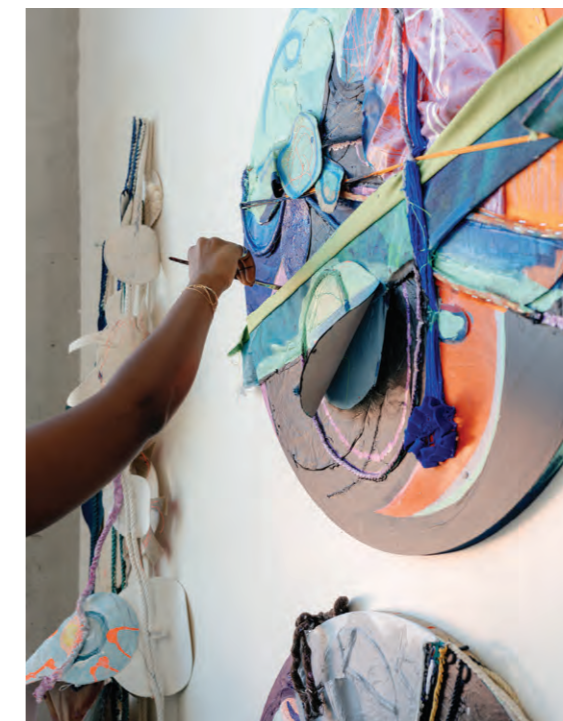


"I wanted to investigate our bodily relationship to a painting."

(2022), a lush landscape is deconstructed into a horizontal dreamscape, a blue-washed cinemascope of botanical bloom and a quiet dawn. The artist debuted the work last year in Hauser & Wirth’s Legacy Russell-curated group exhibition *The New Bend*, which featured contemporary artists exploring the legacy of Alabama’s 19th-century Gee’s Bend quilters. The invitation to ponder on the social reflections of the Black women-led craft movement today inspired her to also create a swing, titled *Swing in Protective Style* (2023). “I wanted to investigate our bodily relationship to a painting,” she explains, “as well as the connotations of hair and braiding.” Vertical knots of thick ropes lifted the wooden swing; the audience assumed a kinetic experience with the inherently static nature of the painting in front of them. A sensory back-and-forth was akin to a dance, with layered histories awaiting to be plunged into and swayed back out of.

of the show’s largest painting, titled *Pistillate* (2023), which embodied a budding arrangement of petal-shaped canvases exploding into a flower. A suspended painting on a curtain contained small size circular canvases, joined together with strings—the draping occupied the middle of the space as a multicolor accent of experimentation. “I was trying to understand the difference between what painting and sculpture can do.” For Williams, conceptualizing the show was “one of the most mental exercises I found myself in,” and it allowed her to approach, “the grand idea of an exhibition,” rather than focusing on artworks as singular entities. The possibility to build an overall togetherness through an expansive installation was “a burst of energy.” She admits that closing the show at the end of last year meant entering the studio again to re-collect that dispersed energy.

Spirit, however, does not lack during





View of "Rachel Eulena Williams: Hair and Body," 2023.

her process. Just like the ropes zigzagging across Williams' paintings, she occasionally travels around the studio in roller-skates. Once she clears the floor off of her materials, she rolls between a few unfinished paintings and skates to her cabinet to reach a paint tube or a piece of cloth. "I get around much easier!" she quips, "and I can quickly roll away from a painting to get a broader look." Similar to the viewer's back-and-forth swing in front of a painting, Williams herself swiftly glides in and out of a surface, dipping into one of her textured compositions and jumping back out with wheeled ease.

The winding moves around the paint-stained concrete floor is similar to a push-and-pull that she intimately explores in her practice. Starting each work flat on the floor, Williams builds her way towards verticality on the wall. The three dimensional properties ensue the initial urge to foremost build a painting. "I am creating a

ting canvases around 2017, a few years after graduating from The Cooper Union with a Bachelor of Fine Arts. The hands-on efforts ushered her practice towards a balance between textured surfaces and the negative space. The challenge to unify various pieces of canvas was soon resolved by the rope. Revealing parts of the wall behind the painting invigorates the work in each presentation and leaves room for open-ended optic potentials: "My vocabulary exists in both visceral and physical places." *Understanding Absorption* (2023) is a horizontal whirlwind of forms, some abstract and others floral. Petal-shaped or geometric, openings across the canvas carve out pockets of air, while pastel shades of blue, purple, yellow, and red wash over the surface dressed with ropes. Color operates yet as another form of binder with thick paint blanketing different textures.

Williams opened her second solo show with Tribeca's Canada gallery in

"My vocabulary exists in both visceral and physical places."

landscape first," she underlines, then implementing techniques of gluing, screwing, and tying towards a sculptural finish. "Allowing all acts to happen at the same time," she has discovered, "always lays the foundation." She finds a thrill in utilizing "all methods under the sun," to create a layered statement which eventually stems from the "push-and-pull between painting and sculpture." What starts out as "a puzzle," organically comes together once she witnesses her configurations "dance together" inside the frame, "but they also blend into the wall."

Growing up in Miami amidst vibrant murals and sharp sunlight perhaps shines through her expansive approach to spatiality and light. "Seeing all those murals inspired me to spread out my forms," she ruminates, "letting such generous amounts of negative space to kick in must come from those experiences."

Williams first experimented with cut-

April, featuring various considerations of historical gate design in New Orleans, in relation to slavery. "The hidden meanings that the blacksmiths incorporated into the patterns are a portal to think about the dichotomy between practicing a form of craft and many forms of barriers," says the artist. In her idea of togetherness, an organic disarray goes hand-in-hand with composed exactness: what she holds in concert thrives in their variance, and she admits: "Not everything has to be balanced, but I need it between different release moments of painting and sculpture." For Williams, a true revelation is in the instant of abstraction having, "the ability of showing the time and the energy that went into it."

