

# artillery

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killer text on art

## NEW YORK

MICHAEL WILLIAMS  
Canada Gallery

IN MIKE WILLIAMS' painting *Tom*, a bearded man holds a stick of Tom's of Maine deodorant which, strangely, appears to be dispensing a bearded face that resembles the man's own. The bearded man seems curious but ambivalent while the deodorant-face appears to be quite jovial. Normally this type of surrealist scene — one concerned with the body and its funkier processes — would evince some trace, at least, of anxiety, but not here. The message is simply the reminder that we all have bodies and that its messy processes are just a part of life.

Williams, anyway, does seem to sincerely love these types of surrealist devices and employs all sorts of similar tricks to good effect. In one painting, a dog in a small room reaches almost to the ceiling. In another, an anthropomorphic frog-like Heineken bottle writhes on the floor in front of mysterious silhouetted figures. What separates this from art-historical Surrealism, is that Williams knows that it's not possible to see these formal devices as a way of channeling subconscious imagery — at least, not anymore — since, at this point, they're more likely to just channel art-historical Surrealist gimmickry. At any rate, sometimes a painting of a frog-like Heineken bottle with green anthropomorphic appendages is just a frog-like Heineken bottle with green anthropomorphic appendages. Likewise, sometimes a cigar really is a phallus.

What makes Williams' paintings so affable and entertaining is that he seems to be comfortable with either inversion of this syllogism. Like any art, it might very well be about his subconscious, but he also knows that these Surrealist tricks are just conventions to play with for effect. In a way,



Michael Williams, *Tom*, 2007

these paintings are about this process of self-consciousness itself. They seem to say, regardless of what we do and our intellectual rationalization for doing so, that it's still nevertheless impossible to know that "subconsciously" we don't have other motivations for doing so — and then acknowledges with a wink and a nod that, well then, yes, obviously there's nothing that we can do about that then, now is there?

Surrealism aside, what really seems to carry his paintings is their detail-obsessive quasi-pointillist mark-making. The aforementioned dog-in-a-room, for example, is less compelling for the goofy surrealism and amusing scale-shifts involved than it is for its lustrous painting and the specificity of his visual language: the dog's coat is comprised of deep brown's, burnt sienna, and yellow ochre, all modulated with an array of subtle, rich hues that nearly glimmer in the dog's fur (or on the surface of the canvas). Here, as in the unctuous crystal ball in *The Duchess of Tareyton*, I think that I can best see what Williams is going for: a type of furtively obsessive mark-making that's neither "filling in," nor modeling, exactly (nor obsessive compulsive); but rather, a complex exploration

of the line between representation and abstraction; and a search for the hidden place where material transforms, mysteriously, into a new type of sign.

—Elwyn Palmerton