

**HOP TO IT**

After graduating, Williams, seen here in his Queens studio, decided, "I just wanted to be in a position to observe my life."

Sittings Editor: Phyllis Posnick.







# BOLD

## STROKES

News-making young painter  
Michael Williams is constantly switching  
up materials, subjects, and expectations—  
especially his own. Dodie Kazanjian reports.  
Photographed by Anton Corbijn.

**A** sheep painting a self-portrait. A digital robot at a keyboard, accompanied by a noisy drunk in a green shirt. A one-legged cow whose body is a human ear. A lobster and a clam, hunched over a computer. You never know what you'll find in a painting by Michael Williams, whose soaring reputation puts him, at the age of 37, in the front rank of emerging

American artists. Nor can you be sure what medium he's using. Oil paint, acrylic, crayon, ink-jet digital printout, and airbrush can all appear in a single one of his layered, crowded, dizzyingly complex, simultaneously abstract and figurative, and wonderfully goofy pictures. They channel late Philip Guston, Albert Oehlen, Carroll Dunham, Peter Saul, and several other contemporary masters, but in essence, there's nothing like them. "If there is goofiness," Williams said recently, "it's always there doing the work of doubt."

The artist of these often chaotic paintings resembles a big, friendly sheepdog. His torn black North Face jacket (it's a cool day) is held together with masking tape. His jeans droop, his hair is uncombed, his beard is scruffy. At six-foot-seven, he towers over me as he leads the way into his studio, a converted perfume factory in Long Island City. "The first month I was here, it was pretty odiferous," he says, "but thankfully, the smell went away."

His manner is laid-back, soothing. "I do most of the painting over there," he says, pointing to an L-shaped extension of the big room we're in, where a dozen or so large paintings lean against the walls. "But this wall is where I put things I'm pretty sure are finished." The images in his paintings used to derive from his own drawings on paper, but lately he's switched to making drawings on a computer, having them transferred to canvas by a commercial printer, and then working on them by hand in the studio. "With oil painting, which I've done for a long time, there's all this evidence of the process—of the struggles involved," he tells me. "When you're drawing with a computer, it can still be a long, tumultuous process. But when you have it printed out, there's no evidence of



the struggle, which I think is really nice. To have to see all that baggage on the painting is a burden." The printer screwed up on the first series of prints for his show last November at the Michael Werner Gallery in London—everything had to be reprinted. Williams kept the botched, off-register prints, though, and eventually decided to use them as the basis of the new paintings we're looking at. "I just started working on top of those," he says.

More than any artist I know, Williams likes to work against things—images, techniques, consistency, collectors, himself. He goes his own contrary way, and his recent success seems to have taken him by surprise. The Museum of Modern Art bought one of his three paintings in its recent group show, "The Forever Now." Steven A. Cohen, Peter Brant, Howard Rachofsky, and other major collectors are lining up to buy his work, and several of the artists he most admires, including Peter Doig, have acquired it. A survey show of a dozen Williams paintings and about 60 of his drawings is currently on view at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, and his New York gallery (which, confusingly, is called Canada) will showcase his latest work next spring. All this suggests an imminent liftoff to market stardom and a mega-gallery takeover, but Williams balks at the thought. "Mike is a competitor," says Phil Grauer, a longtime friend and cofounder of the Canada gallery. "But he certainly never has worried about success or career. A lot of artists pretend to be cool about that, but Mike actually never cares."

**M**ichael Williams grew up in a town called Holicong, near Philadelphia. His father, Michael, Sr., was a radiologist. His mother, Kik, came from a very wealthy family but rebelled against that life. "She's a wild card," Williams says. "She writes poetry, and she encouraged me to do art." They summered in Rhode Island. Kik took a painting class at the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) one year, fell in love with Providence, and moved the family there when Michael was eleven. In his early teens, he spent three summers working for his mother's friend Tina Barney, the artist-photographer. Barney remembers him as being extremely quiet—"Yep and nope, that was a lot for him to say"—but he was "totally focused on what I was doing, a lot of which was quite boring. He was absorbing everything."

After four years at a New England boarding school, Michael, who had been painting since he was nine, knew he wanted to study art, but not at RISD. "I wanted to forge out," he says. He got his B.F.A. at Washington University in St. Louis. "Most of the work I did in college was sort of conceptual," he says. "I ran an art gallery out of my closet, showing work by other students and a professor. It was a small apartment, but it had a big closet." He took a semester off and drove with a friend up to Canada and then down to New Orleans. "I thought it was funny to drive as far north and as far south as I could, but we chickened out in Québec City because it was winter and we were sleeping in the car."

After graduating in 2000, he moved back to Providence.

His parents had separated, and he lived with his mother, trying to write a novel and "doing a lot of Internet art-type stuff. My father was upset with me for failing to launch. He asked me what I wanted to do, and I said I just wanted to be in a position to observe my life. He yelled at me, and I quickly moved to New York. It was good. I'm happy he did that."

Williams moved around a lot and then lived for five years in a shack on top of an old warehouse building in Greenpoint, Brooklyn. In those years, he supported himself by working as an artist's assistant—first for Vito Acconci and then for Matthew Barney. He was also doing small-scale performance works, "on the line between music and art," as he explains it, and "sort of crawling back toward making paintings."

In 2003, a few paintings he had done on old vinyl records were in a group show at Canada, then a young gallery on Chrystie Street, where Williams and his Greenpoint housemate, the artist Joe Bradley, used to hang out. According to Bradley, "Michael was painting at a very high level early on, although it didn't seem like he had major ambition. But he's driven. We played a lot of Ping-Pong, and I don't think I ever won." The gallery took two of Williams's small, thickly impastoed oil paintings to an art fair in a Milwaukee bowling alley. A Los Angeles artist bought them. More group shows and art fairs followed. In

2007, he was offered his first solo show at Canada. He quit drinking. (He quit smoking a year later.) "I was drinking too much," he tells me. "I have a lot of power to stop bad behavior, but not as much to bring on good behavior." Today, he's a health nut who subsists on fresh fruit and vegetables, yogurt, and kombucha. He has also become a dedicated hiker, going off with his cousin on strenuous two-week treks through southern Utah canyons. "It makes me feel in touch with my smallness," he says. "I'm more into nature than culture."

The paintings in his 2007 show verged on comic-book absurdity: a bearded man seeing his reflection in a deodorant tube, a dog spying on a woman taking a shower. "Mike's always been a master at the half-joke thing," Grauer says. "His early shows were collector-repellent. New York hated them. The paint application was grotesquely thick, overly painted in a foolish way. But Mike is a confident guy. And eventually we started to sell some of them."

The year after his first show, Williams met Erika Geldzahler. The daughter of a New Jersey butcher, she had studied art at Bard and the San Francisco Art Institute, where her interest in cooking began to rival her love of painting. She was Michael's polar opposite—warm, talkative, spontaneous, and effervescent. She had worked on the set of the film *Julie & Julia*, making lunch for Meryl Streep and Nora Ephron, and with a couple of friends had recently started a restaurant in Williamsburg called Pies 'n' Thighs. Michael and Erika had actually met before; he had dated her best friend, and Erika persuaded her friend to break up with him. "It was back when he was drinking," she recalls, "and he was crude and loud." She didn't recognize him when she and the same friend bumped into him eight years later. "I said, 'Who is that guy? He's so cute.' And she said, 'Are you joking? That's the guy you told me to break up with.'" A few nights later, they met again and went to the friend's apartment after a party,

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where they cooked strange dishes—“art” pancakes with one fried-egg “cyclops” eye and a bacon mouth.

Erika and Michael spent a lot of time together in Rhode Island that summer, and in December he moved into her Williamsburg apartment. They didn’t get to see each other very much, because he was making paintings for shows in New York, Rome, Copenhagen, and Los Angeles, and she was working night and day at Pies ’n’ Thighs. To spend more time with her, he interned at the restaurant for several months. His work kept changing. Some of the paintings in his second New York solo show, in 2009, were purely abstract; others were wildly distorted versions of representational images. Half of them were sold, in spite of the economic downturn, and *The New York Times’s* Roberta Smith gave the show an upbeat review: “Mr. Williams . . . conveys the lively impression of being both true to himself and willing to mess around.”

By 2011, he was moving away from his thickly painted surfaces. He diluted his oil paint and started using an airbrush to make blurry lines and washes of color. “It was an assault on everything I’d built up over the past ten years. I’d developed a relationship with the lusciousness of thick oil paint—one that tells you something about the weird human who pushed it around the surface. Getting rid of all that, I had to readjust, and just go on faith.” The new work, which appeared in 2012 at the VeneKlasen/Werner Gallery in Berlin, and a year later at Williams’s New York gallery, was a big success. Full of sensory overload and swarming imagery, paintings like *Honk if You Don’t Exist* and *I Can Boil My Own Toast* rewarded viewers with almost too rich a harvest of hilarity and visual excess. His 2013 show at Canada “gives electric evidence that his painterly promise has come to impressive fruition,” Jerry Saltz wrote in *New York* magazine. “I was stunned into something like a stupor by Williams’s work.”

Becoming the focus of art-world attention makes Williams uneasy. He and Erika, who were married in 2011, have two children—a girl, Lettie, age three, and a boy, Lorne, one. They recently decided to move to Los Angeles, to give the kids a better life and to give Michael more head space. “I’ve wanted to leave New York for a long time,” he says. “It’s too expensive. To have a nice time, you have to have so much money that you’re kind of an unethical person.” Erika sold her share in Pies ’n’ Thighs, and Michael set off for L.A. to scout for a place to live. “He called me from JFK and said, ‘I just can’t do it,’ and I realized I didn’t want to go either. Lettie is already so New York-ified. We were walking to preschool the other day, and she said, ‘I need to get a cappuccino.’”

In Brooklyn, the four of them live in a one-bedroom apartment and are looking for a bigger one. They have a part-time nanny, and Erika has started painting again. She



#### IN THE THICK OF IT

*Exist Cop Esquire (13)*, 2014, a richly colored mixed-media work on paper.

and Michael still don’t have much time together, but Michael tries to get home from the studio in time to read to the kids every night—“He has such a relaxing, bedtime-story voice,” Erika says—and every Thursday night the couple have a date. They go for a walk around the McCarren Park track, try out different restaurants for dinner (recently, Ivan Ramen for Japanese, Pok Pok for Thai), and talk “forever.”

Figuring out how to deal with success is a real problem for certain artists. It’s abundantly clear that whatever Williams does, he’s going to do it his way. “He’s larger than the rest of us,” says Grauer. “He’s a giant man who wants his work to be kind of a battering ram that knocks down the cast-iron door so that everyone else can raid the castle with him.”

Near the end of our last conversation, Williams returned to a question I’d asked him earlier about what he was looking for in his work. “I have the feeling that everyone’s work is just about themselves in some way. I throw myself into making paintings that are difficult to do. If a painting is going in a certain direction, I’ll deny that and try to take it somewhere else, then circle around to find the resolution. Days in the studio, giving myself a hard time, are not like a day in the park. I’m just trying to find visual territory that’s uncharted.” □