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Rachel Eulena Williams's Threads of Abstraction

The strength of Williams's new work lies in its transgression of aesthetic and, by extension, social and political lines, which are drawn more sharply in these fraught times.



Rachel Eulena Williams, "Moon Marked" (2020), silkscreen on card, dye and acrylic paint on panel, canvas and cotton rope, 43 × 38 × 3 inches (courtesy the artist and Canada Gallery)

Over the past few years, Rachel Eulena Williams has honed a distinctive style of brightly colored, multi-dimensional abstract paintings. The artist reconfigures canvases that she removes from conventional supports, and collages a myriad of diverse materials onto them. While always interesting, recently the works have taken a decided turn for the better. The artist, who has been exhibiting since 2017, has developed a painting practice that eschews slick production. In her first solo show at Canada, she makes a case for the transgression of aesthetic conventions in abstraction, and the sociopolitical significance of such a transgression.

The show is titled *Tracing Memory*. It signals Williams's interest in painting as a medium capable of containing layered histories. The 12 works in the show make good use of ordinary materials: rope, staples, deconstructed hammocks, various textiles, archival glue, and paint are combined into hybrids that resemble anything from totems to maps, mandalas, or protective shields. These works — some of which appear strikingly unresolved — occupy a middle ground between painting and sculpture, with rope and other textiles caught in a tenuous balance.

“Red Grey Clay” (2020) is one such work. A dynamic interplay of canvas and cut fabric pieces in irregular shapes, painted lemon yellow, cool gray, and orange-red, hang from strands of yellow- and white-painted rope that fan out from a small metal ring. A light gray circle is collaged near the center, flanked by dangling threads of painted rope.



Rachel Eulena Williams, “Red Grey Clay” (2020), silkscreen on card, dye and acrylic paint on hammock, canvas and cotton rope, 72 × 62 × 3 inches (courtesy the artist and Canada Gallery)

collage in the center. Prussian blue and slate gray triangles rotate on the top half, with crimson and orange expanses below. Her use of paint is matter-of-fact, unadorned, and incredibly satisfying. Short pieces of painted rope affixed to the edge of the work and collaged in the foreground lend it a drum-like appearance.

Williams is not alone in her exploration of fabric and everyday materials in service of social and personal aims; she is in good company. The past two years have seen a resurgence of artists in pursuit of this particular strain of abstraction, in shows such as Eric Mack: Lemme Walk Across the Room at the Brooklyn Museum (2019), Mike Cloud: Tears in Abstraction at Thomas Erben Gallery (2019), and Lauren Luloff’s current show, Portraits of Alex and Other Murmurings at Ceysson & Bénétière.

Aesthetic precedents go back much further, however. In 2006, Katy Siegel mounted a traveling exhibition titled High Times/Hard Times: New York Painting 1967-1975. The show took a wide-angle view at an overlooked period of painting at a transitional moment in American society, set against the political turmoil of the late 1960s.

The relationship between the upper half and lower half produces a remarkable sense of tension; the work is a study in contradictions: taut, slack, poised, resistant. It also has undeniable material significance. Rope connotes multiple implications, from there horrific (hanging or lynching) to the mundane (towing and hauling and tying things up) and recreational (relaxing in a hammock). These layers of meaning provide a clue to the artist’s intentions — what may seem at first purely sensual and aesthetic also has social implications.

Drawing is central to Williams’s practice. While her use of dangling threads and collage suggests painterly gestures, her material explorations are related to non-painterly practices, including chine-collé and bookbinding. She often employs letters or text, not to develop a narrative, but to evoke sound.

For all of Williams’s formal experimentation, Tracing Memory relies heavily on a recurring tondo format, so familiar from Renaissance painting. “Cutting Stone” (2020), for instance, is a tondo with a washy, pale blue-gray fabric



Rachel Eulena Williams, "Don't Have to Touch Me to Feel Me" (2020), silkscreen, acrylic paint, and dye on canvas, panel, and cotton rope, 67 × 143 × 3 inches (courtesy the artist and Canada Gallery)

That period, culturally defined by first-wave feminism, the Vietnam War, and the Civil Rights movement, produced a generation of painters contending with an influx of new genres, including performance, video, and an expanded form of sculpture. Painters like Al Loving, Alan Shields, and Elizabeth Murray answered the call by way of deconstruction: putting their paintings on the floor, propping them up like tents, exploring bold color, and eliminating the rectangle altogether. Upending formal conventions, these artists encouraged viewers to question their structures and intended meanings, and in doing so, performed a kind of radical politics. They asserted that the way one addresses a form can alter the viewer's perception of the form and its meaning.

Some 50 years later, the cultural climate in the United States — marked by reactionary politics, polarization, and renewed Civil Rights movements — has produced a handful of artists who occupy similar territory, while much figurative painting appears stylistically conventional and politically polite at best, with a cozy relationship to the market.

The strength of *Tracing Memory* lies in its transgression of aesthetic and, by extension, social and political lines, which are drawn more sharply in these fraught times. While Williams resists the temptation to incorporate figures into her paintings, her works offer no less social commentary than representation could. Rather, the artist, by way of radical material exploration and an anti-virtuosic approach, is continuing the questioning of Western ideals that began with her forebears in the 1960s. Despite sweeping changes in the art world, the show asserts that the dictum still holds true: it's not just what you say; it's how you say it.

Rachel Eulena Williams: *Tracing Memory* continues at Canada (60 Lispenard Street, Manhattan) through January 23.