Canada
60 Lispenard Street
New York, NY
10013

P: 212 925 4631
E: gallery@canadanewyork.com
www.canadanewyork.com

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Art In Conversation

Rachel Eulena Williams with Louis Block

"We can get so caught up in the stories and associations that we have around objects, but when you can get into the now and the action of the work, you can see things more clearly."

Rachel Eulena Williams, pencil on paper by Phong H. Bui.

ON VIEW

Canada
Tracing Memory
December 10, 2020 – January 23, 2021
New York

ON VIEW

The Modern Institute
Silk Cotton Snow
March 19 – April 24, 2021
Glasgow

There is an unusual optimism in Rachel Eulena Williams's art. The materials of her assemblages—canvas, rope, pigment, and more—seem to embody contradictory methods of working. Accretion and destruction, language and gibberish, play and struggle are just a few of the dichotomies that threaten to pull these pieces apart, yet Williams's compositions are held together by brilliant swaths of color, evidence of a level of trust in the process. Painting here is an act of union, both glue and decoration.

Williams (b. 1991, Miami) attended the Cooper Union and now lives and works in Brooklyn. We spoke in January about her show *Tracing Memory* at Canada gallery, and continued the conversation for the opening of her second solo show of the season, *Silk Cotton Snow* at the

Modern Institute in Glasgow. The following is edited together from those conversations.

Louis Block (Rail): I wanted to start with *Tracing Memory* (2019), which was the titular piece from your show at Canada gallery. Where do you source the language for your titles and when in the process of making the work do you title them?

Rachel Eulena Williams: I usually title the work towards the end of the process. Because I'm working abstractly I do find representation as I'm working. That piece is titled after a book that I've been referencing for a long time that sources a lot of African symbols. It contains this whole dictionary, and it felt very otherworldly to see these symbols meaning completely different things or having their own stories. I started to think about how a lot of our sources and definitions are implied from things around us. And in titling this show, in thinking about memory and thinking about the mind, I was thinking pretty literally about the head.

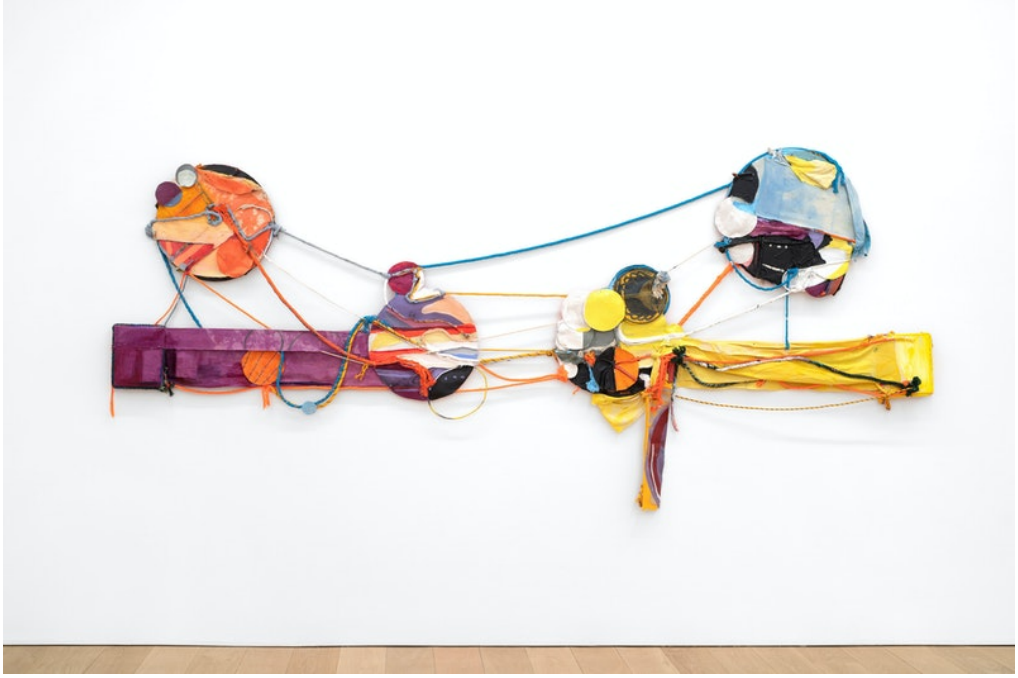
Rachel Eulena Williams, *Tracing Memory*, 2019. Acrylic paint on panel, canvas and cotton rope, 48 x 29 x 3 inches. Courtesy the artist and Canada, New York. Photo: Joe DeNardo.

Rail: Looking at it as a head or portrait and thinking back to traditional genres of painting, like still life, portraiture, landscape, is there one genre that you would lean towards in terms of the procedures in your work or precursors that you might see leading to your work?

Williams: I think of them as pretty surreal, and they could almost be still lifes. If you think of the history of color, and the way that color has been erased throughout history, I've worked a lot to think about the work as a reframing of art history. So, the color and the material sense of it can really tell its own story. I think of each element and its own real function in the world, not necessarily as a depiction, and so I can grab the materials instead of trying to represent them. It is a kind of poetic placing of things together to tell a story. There is a sense of surreal abstraction happening.

Rail: Are you trying to convey a certain narrative to the viewer? Or are you more interested in what the viewer brings to the experience, and the work being a tool for them to access that narrative?

Williams: I think that we all have a collective social narrative that we experience at the same time. So, I do think of my work in relation to time, of course, but when I say story, I think a lot of that comes with the materials I'm using. The materials have a narrative, a history that you pull together from a lot of things, and not just one moment in time like a representational image. You're connecting materials as they are exposed, asking yourself where the objects were supposed to be, and I think that sort of narrative is what I'm trying to bring into my paintings.



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 x 143 x 3 inches. Courtesy the artist and Canada, New York. Photo: Joe DeNardo.

Rail: You've talked in other interviews about naming yourself a painter versus a sculptor. It's obvious in front of the work that it exists in multiple languages and mediums, but I wonder if there's a dominant impulse related to mediums that drives the work, that drives you to make decisions in the studio, whether it's composition or the actual building of these objects.

Williams: I think that I'm coming from a sculptural lens, where the armature of the works and their tactility provide their own way of reading a two or three-dimensional line. But there's a game in it where you can get lost in not knowing or not being able to tell which is or which isn't. That's part of the poetic narrative to it, to be able to get lost in that. Especially in a work like *Don't Have to Touch Me to Feel Me* (2020), it has to do with gravity and balance.

There is a whole set of moments that are kind of connecting and holding to help each other stand up, so the wall is almost necessary in terms of creating something like that. Sometimes I can have very sculptural moments of making, and creating the actual armature and then sometimes I'm almost cosmetically creating and focusing on just the color, which helps to not get so bogged down by choices in the studio. And also how much of a story the color can tell and how much it can connect—there are so many different layers and parts coming together. So, it's almost like this power that the color has over the physical, the material.

Rail: Hearing you talk about color, I'm wondering if you ever think of color as symbolic or referential, or is it more related to the overall mood and composition of the pieces?

Williams: Sometimes I'm thinking about color for how it's going to help the image, or how it relates to the white, because working on the wall in this way can make the wall almost like drawing paper. There are a lot of tonal decisions that are almost functional, but a lot of the time I'm choosing colors that resonate with me, and so there are a lot of purples and yellows in this show.

Rail: I'm curious about when you began using rope as a material.

Williams: When I first broke away from representational work, I was thinking about the rope very conceptually in relation to control and the dynamics of power, but the work was usually performative and installation based. As I started to return to painting I saw the rope more for its form and function, using it to break the painting structure and thinking about how I could create a story or some type of poem. It's like I'm using it as the armature of the work, transforming lines and marks into sorts of stretcher bars. It's really become a necessity in different ways. I've incorporated many different types of ropes, and they all have their own connotations and tell these great stories of adventure and also pain, so I'm continually finding different ways to speak with the materials. Some of the ropes are from hammocks, and I began using them for their grid structure, which creates a great point system to frame the work. I also like how much it is associated with the body. So, I began using the hammocks with an objective to subtly introduce the body. A lot of the shapes are like this person or this body reaching outwards and kind of springing out. Moving the head shape around, I'm thinking of it as abstracting not the literal definition or what we think of as a head or a body, but maybe a symbolic one.

Rail: What's so exciting about a lot of the work is that there are these elements that can be read as specific shapes, or letters, or body parts, but that don't necessarily cohere into a recognizable image. There's that fundamental tension between legibility and abstraction.

Williams: I'm thinking about how I can create abstraction, but also create it in a way that is open. Thinking about form, something that helps open art up to more people is that visceral experience.

Rachel Eulena Williams, *Dawn*, 2021. Silkscreen on card, dye and acrylic paint on panel, canvas, and cotton rope, 74 1/8 x 47 1/4 x 5 7/8 inches. Courtesy the artist and the Modern Institute, Glasgow.

Rail: In the tondo paintings, you're using rope as a framing element around the circular panel that the work is on, almost like a continuous mark around it, but it also frays as a reminder of the grid and pattern. In a way, it solves the problem of edge that a lot of painters struggle with, in that it leads the eye onto the wall, but also delineates the composition.

Williams: Yes, it's part of creating a kind of otherworldliness. It helps pronounce all of those small lines that are in between, and it speaks to the layers and the process of it, while also having its own material history. It definitely helps lead you back and forth between the wall and the works, especially in the works with a lot of white that alludes to the wall and blending in. The more you look at it, the more you start to understand that the line is not the wall because of that frame, it's just part of the illusion or the game. This idea of a playful environment is something that I really am always thinking about in the work. Recently I've been thinking about the *Splendid Playground* show at the Guggenheim of the Gutai movement, which I thought was so interesting because they were working in very performative ways, but also

making work that was colorful and playful. I'm always thinking about working on creating experiences.

Rail: There is that moment of the unpredictable, like how much the rope can actually fray and become something other than a line.

Williams: Those are great moments that feel very familiar to me, and I like including that in the work, something familiar and understandable to me.

Rail: In another interview you refer to the process of finishing the work as giving it a haircut. I love that image.

Williams: Yes, that's exactly how it feels when I'm working on the pieces, because there's a very cosmetic aspect to it, covering something up. There are all these moments that have lots of layered lines and marks, and when I'm finishing the works, there's always room for more negative space, almost like I want there to be this magical feeling of levitation or a kind of breath to them. And so, that haircut feeling is coming in at the end and snapping out moments that are unnecessary or moments that I'm going to move into other pieces.

Rail: Another tension in the work is of the different speeds and velocities of working, where you have these moments that seem like very quick studio decisions, like rope making an arc, and then you have these moments of accretion of material onto the surface over time. Can you talk about the speed that you work at and how these pieces develop in the studio?

Rachel Eulena Williams, *Over the Eyes*, 2020. Silkscreen, dye and acrylic paint on panel, canvas, cotton rope and hammock, 61 x 49 x 3 inches. Courtesy the artist and Canada, New York. Photo: Joe DeNardo.

Williams: *Over the Eyes* (2020) is a great example of how much the title of the show relates to the more traditional panel works. I've worked with cutting the canvas for a long time, primarily stretching it with the ropes. But I returned back to these panel works in a sense to see how I could impact the conversation by going back to it. There is a lot of layering and time in them. If you look at the bright yellow dyed section on the top left of the painting, that is actually a big mark of fabric pulling across layers of painting and materials, so you're really seeing small windows into all of these moments. I guess that's how it feels at times in life, that there are so many collections of different times and energies, and I think that's what I'm putting into the paintings. At times I'm very intentional and close to the works and at others I can be very messy and abstract. The materials almost create borders for those moments, like the big hammock creates a physical line that you then see. With the idea of tracing memory, the memories of the painting are actually physical memories, showing what you would normally not see underneath the surface of the painting, which is typically many attempts at painting or layers.

Rail: When you have these pieces that are going to come together to make larger works in the studio, are they organized into different types?

Williams: When I was speaking about giving the works haircuts, I'll save those cut moments in my studio where they become material with its own history. It's almost like these—they're not rejected moments—but they're the moments that aren't working and something else that could completely transform another work. So, I do organize my works almost in time, and by how much history the works have. So, the studio is like this mess of ordered time. A lot of this kind of pulling away that you'll see in the work is intentional and really part of the practice, because I do need to have this information that I feel like I'm taking from another painting and moving around.

Rail: There is a detail in *Moon Marked* (2020) in a purple slice of the composition, where there was an orange piece of canvas stapled in and then removed, and the staple and tuft of orange is all that remains as a mark.

Williams: That's exactly what I'm talking about in terms of ripping away something. A lot of the time, certain moments in the paintings connect because they were physically connected at one point, and so this is a moment of putting canvas down and then cutting a line and pulling

away the rest of it. That kind of action has a sense of tactile creation.

Rail: And the way that the threads splay out, it reminds me of a star against the sky. Do you ever return to works after they've been exhibited and deconstruct them or add to them?

Williams: I have. I do enjoy that. It's even more along the lines of what I was speaking about earlier, which is grabbing these moments that feel as if they didn't make sense in other works. It gives a whole other context to taking works from different moments, another layer of tactile information.

Rachel Eulena Williams, *The Orange Beneath the Moon*, 2019. Dye and acrylic paint on panel, canvas and cotton rope, 54 x 30 x 3 inches. Courtesy the artist and Canada, New York. Photo: Joe DeNardo.

Rail: You maintain a drawing practice alongside making the larger works. Do you think of the drawing practice as a sort of sketching in preparation for the larger work or as a separate process altogether?

Williams: When you can see the rope works finished, it's almost like this drawing coming to life. When I'm drawing I'm imagining myself creating the larger works with my hands, so it's like I have this glossary for different marks and different lines that represent different ropes. By constantly drawing, I can have a better understanding of how the shapes will relate and talk to each other, and what they will mean together.

Rail: And there are also monoprints where you incise into the ink.

Williams: Yes, those are made the opposite way of how you would think. I lay down the color and create the negative space, filling it with all of these extra colors in the same way that I create big swatches in my studio. And the swatches of color get collaged into this empty space I've created by drawing with the back of the paintbrush.

Rail: I like to think of the difference in scale between drawings and larger work in terms of the difference between the pivot of the wrist and the pivot of the shoulder, different scales but attached to the same limb, and what that difference means.

Williams: That's why I think that drawing is so important, because you can have more of that. It's almost like how you get such a different perspective looking at images on your phone. If I base too much on the materials I could get lost in that difference of the physical body versus the wrist. Drawing a lot is really helpful, then going to work on those materials.

Left: Rachel Eulena Williams, *Collagraph (3)*, 2019. Etching ink and canvas on paper. Right: *Circuit*, 2019. Etching ink, canvas, and string on paper, 33 5/8 x 24 1/2 inches each. Courtesy the artist and the Modern Institute, Glasgow.

Rail: Do the smaller pieces on paper ever make it into the larger works as a collage element, or vice versa?

Williams: They do. It's all really connected. I've done some monoprinting on rice paper, and you can adhere that to canvas really well with matte medium, so I've done that a lot with the different images I can make by running my pieces through a press. I do like to work with adding different materials onto the drawing as it's finished. It's kind of like adding hand embellishments, usually small pieces of writing or text or small moments of cut canvas from my studio. And I'm always thinking about cutting the canvas to pull information from smaller moments.

Rail: You recently did a screenprinting fellowship, and there is this one repeated image of a head screenprinted onto fabric throughout the show. I'm curious where that image came from and how you started incorporating it into the work.

Williams: I was looking at the signs outside a lot of different hair salons in preparation for my fellowship, which is where I found this image. I've been using it almost as a kind of extension of the circle and thinking about the head, the hair, and the circles inside of the eyes. I was interested in how I could abstract the idea of the person being there without the body. It's not me, but I think it's this idea of me, and this idea of the self and looking for the self-portrait of the artist in the work. I was thinking of the Arnolfini portrait, where the portrait of the artist is all the way in the back of the painting, and it's this game of searching for it. I liked the idea that I could create this silkscreen and have the image work almost as a logo or something that the viewer can look for throughout the show. I also felt like it was something I wanted to deconstruct.

Rail: You're talking about paying special attention to hair salons. Are there other subjects, or other things outside of the studio that you're paying special attention to and holding in your mind?

Williams: I've always thought about how the color around you can affect you—about the outsides of buildings or houses, and interior spaces. I think about that a lot. And that was in the paintings, you can see a lot of that in the white framing, creating that foreground and background with darker shades versus lighter shades and almost creating letters and pushing things back. So, I've thought a lot about how design and color can affect you.

Rachel Eulena Williams, *Watching from the Window*, 2019. Acrylic, rope, and canvas on wood panel, 24 5/8 x 21 5/8 x 2 3/4 inches. Courtesy the artist and the Modern Institute, Glasgow.

Rail: You grew up in Miami, and moved to New York to attend the Cooper Union. Were there any experiences that you had with art that you saw when you were younger that made you want to become an artist?

Williams: I was really lucky to see all of the different kinds of art coming to Miami. I also went to school in the design district, and so I would always ride the bus past Little Haiti, where there are all of these signs and paintings around the walls and a lot of decorations on the outside of buildings. It really is more of a hand-painted and hand-done community. I passed by that every day and that probably had a big impact on me, the way that we went from these machine-made signs to the hand-painted signs and then back into this regular kind of manufactured world. I'm sure it had a huge influence on the work I make now, and it's what's kind of pushing me to make work now. I don't know about making work back then —I just always made work.

Rail: You were telling me the other day about going to Barcelona and seeing Joan Miró's textile works there, and we were also talking about Suzanne Jackson and her show two years ago in Tribeca.

Williams: Yes, I remember seeing Miró's tapestry and thinking that it was so visceral. It's very large and all-encompassing, but it's also two-dimensional and three-dimensional in its considerations. It had an influential impact on me—seeing it in person it felt like it was kind of holding you. I was also excited to see Suzanne Jackson speak, and hearing that she was collecting all of these pieces of time and putting them together as well, really allowing things to happen organically and just placing those moments together.

If we look at a piece of mine like *Orange Blood* (2020), there are moments where the material is hanging without any manipulation, so kind of pulling and stretching things and letting the material speak for itself. In other work I'm exploring a way of pulling apart the

canvas and destroying the canvas, but also creating images in the process. I was thinking a lot about Al Loving, and how he kind of created these quilts, with the dyed canvas that's been torn up, and it's like you're destroying something to create something new. I think it's an interesting way to broaden and understand what I'm trying to do with my work. I'm always thinking about artists who are working with experience and material, but also thinking about how to dismantle this system of painting, the way of painting and the process of painting. So, I have a lot of interest in artists who work even completely outside of painting.

Rachel Eulena Williams, *Orange Blood*, 2020. Acrylic paint and dye on canvas, panel, and cotton rope, 60 x 98 x 3 inches. Courtesy the artist and Canada, New York. Photo: Joe DeNardo.

Rail: There is fluorescent paint on the back side of some of your works, and it reflects light back onto the wall to create a kind of glow around the individual elements in bright colors like orange, yellow, or pink. It brings the wall into play and activates the work in a sculptural way.

Williams: I have been doing that for a long time as a way to speak to the shadow that is created behind the work, and to kind of control the shadow. The color almost disappears and gets fuzzy—that black shadow that's usually behind the work is disrupted by the pink. It gives attention to that small area that's behind it. So, you can think that the work is flat, and then as you get closer that pink can almost show you that it isn't, because it's so commanding.

Rail: You've also made work that is fully sculptural, like *Up from the center* (2018), which was suspended and hanging in a space that you could walk around to see its two distinct sides. You also said that you had worked in more of an installation mode. Do you feel tethered to making discrete wall works now, or are you keeping the door open to creating something that projects more into the space of the gallery itself?

Williams: I'm excited to keep going in that direction. In that work I really wanted to express this idea of painting and sculpture. If you were to look at it just on a surface, it would be unrecognizable because it would be engulfed by the painting elements, but when you take it off the wall and you suspend it in space, it becomes an object again. That was the way that the hammocks were originally introduced into the work, thinking about that central point at the top and how everything could flow from it. I made that work, and then other works with hammocks built off of that, so the other end of that hammock is in another piece. That's a good example of the work being very sculptural.

Rail: While we're speaking about the work existing in space. I wanted to ask about your show *Coco Currents* in 2017. There was a dance performance choreographed by Megan Marcano during the show in dialogue with your work. How did that dialogue begin?

Williams: The gallery wanted to create that conversation, and I thought it was perfect because the work at the time was really dancing between painting and sculpture. I was really cutting the pieces up and moving them around. There was so much information in some of those moments and it's really great to revisit the images because there is a lot of fluidity being evoked in the performance.

Rail: Do you think about the marks and the lines of your paintings being indicative of, or mirroring your actions in the studio as a sort of trace of making them?

Williams: I never thought of it that way. The performative aspect of abstract art is really important. I'm thinking of the performance as the act of all of the material gathering and placement and the performance of cutting the materials down. Working with the hammocks has been great, to have that feeling of taking something apart and destroying it. So, the performative aspect is almost in the work itself, and not so much related to action painting as you'd think with paint splashing everywhere. It's a different action in terms of story and physical deconstruction.

Rail: I wanted to consider the works like *Don't Have to Touch Me to Feel Me* (2020) and *To look down the sea* (2020), which have circular panels connected by strands of rope. In front of them, I almost feel like I'm looking at a kind of atomic view of a system, where there are these individual elements bound together by inherent forces, and the ropes and marks act as diagrams for those forces. I also think about the Greek atomistic view of matter being made up of the four elements, water, earth, fire, air. They could also be considered on a macro scale in terms of planets or solar systems, and some of the titles touch on that. Is there an interest in that kind of system?

Williams: For a moment, there was a processing of the circles and shapes as like a person, in terms of the body, and I started to think of those circles almost as these touch pads and part of this machine, and the person touching them and being part of the machine. I think that it's all coming together to kind of replicate a system of change or a system of transformation.

Rail: We could think of pieces like that as different celestial bodies or different objects in space, or, going back to the title of the show, the trace of the history of one object through space.

Williams: There is that kind of memory, especially in the transition of lighter colors to darker colors. It's kind of like the fade away meme, like going in and out of sight. A lot of the times I can find home in certain shapes or certain relationships of shapes because they do make sense together. When I'm working on those pieces, there are smaller wood panels that are hidden in the corners, and then the rest is cut canvas. I'm approaching a regular wood panel as a pedestal. It's holding on to the painting materials in a different way. The traditional painting surface is actually the beginning of a whole other image.

Rachel Eulena Williams, *Red Grey Clay*, 2020. Silkscreen on card, dye and acrylic paint on hammock, canvas and cotton rope, 72 x 62 x 3 inches. Courtesy the artist and Canada, New York. Photo: Joe DeNardo.

Rail: I love how you're giving agency to the individual elements, and I think it goes back to how we were speaking about the rope being so versatile as a mark or an armature and existing between form and function. The hammocks have certain associations with leisure and sleep, but rope by itself, as you've said, has a lot to do with control and distress. I wonder how much you think about countering the associations that the materials bring into the work.

Williams: I think being able to see something for what it is, and then being able to move past it is what I hope the work can give the viewer. So, you have that understanding of the material, the ropes, specifically, its history, its context, but then you have this other place where you can choose between the reality of it, or the reality of the story that comes from the work, moving away from this kind of grief and seeing how it can be transformed into something positive. It's a bit of a game for the viewer to say, is this a piece about struggle, or is this a piece about joy and relaxation? There's a conversation in terms of what the viewer can understand through the use of these objects, because the actions can speak to that narrative of destruction and catharsis.

Rail: Maybe it also goes back to thinking about the work as surreal, and the hammocks seem to allow for that reading of the work as past and present being held together in a dreamlike state.

Williams: I think we can get so caught up in the stories and associations that we have around objects, but when you can get into the now and the action of the work, you can see things more clearly. That's the transformation I want to happen around the work.

Rachel Eulena Williams, *Dark Clay*, 2021. Acrylic paint and dye on hammock, canvas and cotton rope, 67 3/8 x 74 1/8 x 2 3/8 inches. Courtesy the artist and the Modern institute, Glasgow.

Rail: I was thinking about that sort of ambiguity or transformation in relation to the title of your new show at the Modern Institute in Glasgow, *Silk Cotton Snow*, a phrase that can read like a poem. Each individual word is bound up in this history of beauty, but also in a history of destruction and struggle, from silk production to the history of slavery in this country, and then the power of the environment, thinking about the terrible storm that just happened in the South. But then it's all blanketed under this connotation of purity or beauty.

Williams: Exactly. Working on this show solidified something I've been searching for. The title speaks to what I'm trying to do within the works, understanding traditional form and questioning that form, with the hope of creating things in a new way. In the title there is this kind of sandwiching of these two pure things with cotton, which is very complex. It was a poetic gesture to frame my practice and what I'm trying to achieve.

Rail: It also seems significant that those three words are designating something white or devoid of color.

Williams: Yes, and this show has a lot of blocking out with white, pushing to really play with shape and create new shapes. Does it have the power to really blank out the material that's underneath it? It's still there, you can still see it and feel it, even if you are trying to cover it up.

Rachel Eulena Williams, *Snow Sounds*, 2021. Silkscreen on card, dye and acrylic paint on panel, canvas and cotton rope, 38 5/8 x 38 5/8 x 2 inches. Courtesy the artist and the Modern institute, Glasgow.

Rail: Right, the white acts not so much as an act of erasure, but maybe brings forward the physicality of those sections.

Williams: So, the colorful sections almost become more three-dimensional compared to those sections that I'm actively trying to blank out to make more two-dimensional. The texture starts to come out, because that act of cohesion will reveal all the differences.

Rail: I wanted to consider the tondos again, and think about them in relation to science fiction. Many of the pieces do have a sort of futuristic feeling to them. We've talked so much about the work engaging with memory and the past, but do you think about it as pointing to the future as well?

Williams: I definitely think that science fiction is exciting as a source of inspiration, especially through an Afrofuturist kind of lens. When you can put visual language around reading it's such a personal experience. We were talking before about Octavia Butler's short stories, and one of them, called "The Evening and the Morning and the Night," has this group of people who are unable to keep from destroying themselves and their bodies, and I thought

about how destruction is such a big part of these stories, and how you are kind of happy to see certain things destroyed. A lot of the time I'm thinking about how to incorporate that as part of the visual language, and to add to the narrative. There are a lot of silvers, and a lot of black, and a kind of contrast to these more futuristic colors. It's a bit of that touching and feeling experience of the story, if you could put the experience of the story into a feeling.

Rail: There's another story, "Amnesty," in the same collection, where the alien entities are these plant or fungus-like forms, and the way that they communicate with humans is by enveloping them in their branches and speaking through touch. It's interesting to think about in terms of how tactile artmaking is, especially the type of painting and sculpting that you're doing.

Williams: That's probably the exact kind of feeling I had in front of Miró's tapestry work, this huge hug of feeling, compared to seeing his two-dimensional works. It felt like an experience to see that touch. I think sometimes the work can be very ephemeral, in a sense, and so it's a balance between this kind of destructiveness but then also this friendliness and warmness.

Rail: I think artists have this trust for the tactile, this trust for knowledge that doesn't have to be verbalized.

Rachel Eulena Williams, *Silent Moss*, 2020. Silkscreen on card, dye and acrylic paint on panel, canvas and cotton rope, 38 x 40 x 3 inches. Courtesy the artist and Canada, New York. Photo: Joe DeNardo.

Williams: Yes, it's almost like this idea of seeing and believing, that you have to see something to know it's there, in a sense, or to believe it was there. Playing with that in different ways, with the memory of the objects being there, or the physicality of how they're put together, or even how the materials will hold the memory. For example, in *Silent Moss* (2020) there's a small piece of red with yellow string over it near the face shape, and it's actually being held—that memory is being held by the physicality of the material—so, it's protected by those yellow lines. That red dye there under the cocoon of that one piece is totally unrecognizable now, it only has that one part left to tell the story.

Rail: I love thinking about time as a material to use in the pieces, but not related to how you would normally describe speed in painting—the slowness of paint drying or the speed of a gesture—more related to memories or history being embedded into scraps.

Williams: What I'm doing with the work is taking different moments and finding a point where they all meet, finding order within disorder. It probably is just the way that I'm working and living, knowing that there will be a moment where everything from the past will make sense and have that kind of cohesion. That's what feels comforting, that so much is happening, but at the same time, there's always this moment of things coming together. I've always felt this sense of things butting up against each other like a mosaic or stained glass, remaining separate but telling a story to me. And I hope they can tell a story to someone else.

Contributor

Louis Block

Louis Block is a painter based in Brooklyn.