



RICHARD WILLIAMS

flesh and blood the art of re – mythologizing

RICHARD WILLIAMS

Flesh and Blood

Gallery 1.1.1.

School Of Art

University of Manitoba

November 8 - 29, 1996



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INTRODUCTION:

I first met Richard Williams at the opening of Robert McKaskell's "Those Who Stayed-Manitoba's School of Art, 1960-1970" in 1994. A distinguished, silver-haired gentleman, he seemed amazingly young to have been director of the School for 19 years and retired since 1987. As the Gallery worked on plans for an exhibition of work solely created by those who were former and present Directors of the School and/or the Gallery, we were in contact on several more occasions and I continued to be impressed with his knowledge of art and his interest in the development of the School and the Gallery.

When this show was proposed to our Exhibition Committee, I was pleased to be asked to work with Richard and George Swinton to bring it to fulfilment. The work in this exhibition spans over 50 years and exemplifies the dedication, exploration and excellence achieved by the artist. His interest in the human form, particularly the female form rendered in his realistic style, has developed over time to give us works of exquisite sensuous beauty and intense sensitivity. Concerned with uniting the present with the theological teachings of the past, his winged creations speak to us on a parallel with the new-age resurgence of interest in the "angel". Though their beauty is idealized, we feel the positive energy and despite the mystery, are inspired for the future. Gallery 1.1.1. is pleased to present this exhibition in partnership with the Provincial Department of Culture, Heritage and Citizenship for your enjoyment.

Donalda Johnson



Earth Day, 1991 acrylic on canvas 60.8 x 92 cm Collection of the artist

FLESH AND BLOOD:

Richard Williams and the Art of Re – mythologizing

To categorize Richard Williams as modern, contemporary or post-modern would be as irrelevant to his work as it would be to his technique and to him as a person. In our times – i.e., in the 1990's – these words have fallen out of common use. At least, I hardly dare to use them anymore as they have become tainted by art historical, critical and journalistic jargon attempting to categorize periods, art trends and artists.

When once it was said to Williams by an art official that his work was “not mainstream,” that mere art-trend-thinking individual was, in fact, quite right: Williams and his work are not mainstream, they are not in fashion, nor are they *avânt – garde*. They are outside any current art trend. They simply are. Yet Williams is in many ways a ‘modern’ – a man (a person, in fact, a male) with mostly modern, secular views, but not necessarily modern tastes.

Then, of course, art officials have flippantly parroted again and again the ‘modern movement in art’ labels and epithets (cf. Impressionism, Pointillism, Vauxcelles’ Fauvism, Apollinaire’s Cubism, Ezra Pound’s Vorticism, etc.). In fact, Picasso once had to assert himself opposite a typecasting journalist, saying “I am not a Cubist painter, I invented Cubism.” For he knew that in art, particularly in modern art, “one who follows will always be behind.” What Williams follows is himself, himself within his world of ideas and history, and of his instincts. And these include his senses or, dare one say, his essential sensuousness? That his senses include unconventional religiousness could escape only the ultraorthodox, the odd antireligious or the totally insensitive. The question ensuing here is: is his being so unconventionally religious also a part of his abiding pictorial sensuousness? Or does this sensuousness like

that of the mystics – which includes the intellect! – manifests itself as a variety of religious ecstasy? And, even more, is Williams’ imagistic sensuousness not also the conviction and delight of a highly religious modern person vis – a – vis feminist interpretations of Mary as the eternally present feminine?(1) Mary not merely being a mythical pseudomorph because of her immaculate conception but the ultimate, uncorrupted, archetypal female as actual, physical mother. Or is she the archetypal mother as physical woman?

As Williams so candidly describes in the introduction to his 1993 exhibition “MARY HAD A DREAM” at the Main/Access Gallery “...ancient hatreds may threaten her but enduring love, generosity of spirit, faith, hope and forgiveness are at the heart of the story and are embodied in my image of Mary. Add to this Mary’s awesome powers as the Virgin Mother and we are brought face to face with that feminine force that has most profoundly influenced the course of Western History.” To which he sadly adds “...not always for the best, some would say; but whose fault is that? I am trying to discover what all this can mean to me and, by extension to others.” And then he confidently assures that “...although the mystery of the Virgin Birth defies common sense and the ‘truth’ of the whole story is challenged daily by hard-headed studies, ...*I offer it as established fact.*” (italics mine) He then continues emphatically “... my Mary has been removed from a distant past and is shown in the here and now. She is as human as we are and dreams of better times. Listening to the promises of an angel, she agrees to risk everything in order to help reinvent her world.” (cf. St.Luke 1, verses 26 - 38)

Earlier in the introduction he had warned the viewer that his “images should not be confused with religious icons nor are they intended ever to serve anyone’s misogyny. On the contrary, they try to dismantle the bloodless image underlying the visceral polemics of gender politics.” (2) But, contrary to his warnings, I have learned to

view these images as religious icons.

The images first seen could be viewed quite literally as physical likenesses or merely as optical representations of what they plainly are imaging or picturing. But images go beyond mere literalness. They almost never are mere optical representations. Inevitably they also are metaphors, premeditated or unpremeditated signs and symbols which represent or denote varying meanings, or have connotations going beyond literal and optical representations. Like religious icons, they are truly able to represent: analogically, allegorically, metaphorically, symbolically, poetically, textually, etc. Individually and all together, they evoke in me the conventional religious and devotional imagery as I remember them from my childhood, painted on wooden panels nailed to trees or mounted on poles like standards or placed with Stations of the Cross along roadsides and calvaries.

Williams, interested in and knowing the visual language – imagery and techniques – of the earlier Renaissance, re-invents its application and creates his very own kind of imagemaking which certainly lies outside today's mainstream. (3) For it is based on theological and literary references, including the "Virgin Birth as an established fact," in a culture as anti-literary as ours. And, also, having asserted that "she agreed to risk everything in order to help reinvent her world," Williams adds that "...alone she makes her shattering decision in an age beset by politicised differences." But then, right away, he proclaims that "...it is time for a change – a new millennium – and Mary, like Solomon's bride, 'is she who looketh forth as the morning, fair as the moon, clear as the sun, and terrible as an army with banners.'"(4)

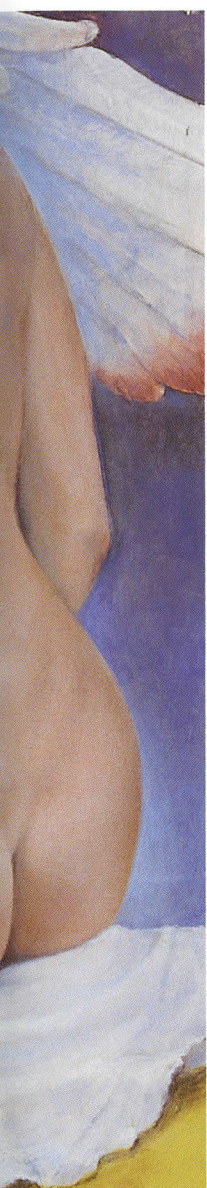
That precisely – purity, praise and awe – sets the major key leading to comprehension and apprecia-

tion – aesthetic and literary – of Williams' re-mythologized work. Two major affirmations of his work and thoughts were published at the time of his first solo exhibition "LADY DAY"(5) at Gallery 1.1.1. in March 1986: Dale Amundson's Introduction to the small, but exquisite exhibition catalogue and Arthur Adamson's review article in *Border Crossings*, Summer 1986. These two publications are poignant and vital. My preface to **FLESH AND BLOOD** is merely intended to put together a thematic context to the works in this exhibition.

There is yet another important key to the comprehension of the work, and to Williams himself, namely that he is so truly American in the best sense of the so ethnically loaded and politically incorrect phrase. But having lived and taught in the United States (particularly in New England) for five years, I felt highly privileged in getting to know what I then called "the heart of Americanism." I refer to that open, naively confident yet utterly pragmatic capacity of believing in and searching for the near impossible, the never quite real, and the almost unknowable. Williams' retelling – re-mythologizing – the story of Mary and the Annunciation contains the magical American element of idealism combined with hideous realism, of poetic narrative combined with repugnant imagery, the Garden of Eden combined with the hell of urban America in which barbarism and polemics exert aggressive influences. To me, all this lies behind Williams' bold attempt to re-mythologize the imagery of the Christian Annunciation in order to bring the biblical story, so difficult to accept rationally, into the drama of a current context. It is unfortunately this dramatic but very magical context which, without explanations or guidance, easily remains hidden to contemporary viewers. Adamson and Amundson help us with their telling interpretations and discerning clues. However, while they thereby invite further searching, I am inclined to



Flesh and Blood, 1994 oil on masonite 119.4 x 304.8 cm Collection of the Artist



Mary Had A Dream, 1992 oil on canvas 91.5 x 122 cm
Collection of the Artist

hope and opt for personal, creative sensing as Williams' work lends itself to multiple readings. His images, like his titles, are more poetic than prosaic, just as they often are ambiguous or controversial, permitting and even demanding diverse interpretations. This by itself is a challenging quality of the art of painting that it can afford the luxury of ambivalence, i.e., of not being entirely explicit or overly specific. Illustrations have to be that and, mostly, that alone. In painting – as in music – experience, imagination and feeling of the viewers participate in completing works of art through individual perceptions of form and narrative.

As Williams painted his – dining room – triptych with Mary sitting on the table, the potential symbolism of the sacrament of Holy Communion, the Eucharist of the Last Supper, - i.e., the dispensing of bread and wine (the flesh and blood) - unfolded as a revealed reality: Mary as the ultimate meal of the Last Supper, dispensed on the Communion table - Mary as the Flesh and Blood of the Incarnation. The triptych's title "Flesh and Blood" is to me, therefore, the most significant clue to the entire exhibition – Mary accepting her sacrificial role as the Virgin Mother, but now re-mythologized. That angel, by the way, is Gabriel the messenger from God and not the stereotyped, cute little putto figure recently so fashionable in popular culture, nor even the perennial guardian angel. In the triptych's metaphoric imagery, the angel is God's messenger angel Gabriel; the young woman is Mary (with all that this implies); the table on which she sits is a table (as a transfigured offertory slab – an altar?); the red ribbon running through the composition is a ribbon, as a ribbon of blood? the three little angels on the right wing are three little feminine angels, as a chorus? as witnesses? witnesses to what? And the cup? On the other hand, I can easily conceive of an imaginative televi-

sion producer using Williams' paintings, letting the camera float around in them, with voices of an interviewer with Williams and perhaps one or two friends behind the camera, probing the possibilities and subtleties of the paintings' form and content. Yet, while we would get some very good notions, we still would not be able to know unequivocally what is what, and why is why. For our senses and our minds would be stimulated not to 'know' unconditionally, but to see beyond that which is pictured or described. And then, with Williams, as pictorially and textually conveyed by him, we might be able to see or, at least, to feel, the Annunciation and Virgin Birth – now re-mythologized – "as an established fact" as he had offered it to us.

George Swinton, Winnipeg, 1996

EPILOGUE

In its beginnings, art history was largely based on the formal aspects of style and beauty, i.e., on the formal qualities of connoisseurship. Only in the 1920's did Erwin Panofsky, Edgar Wind and the Warburg Institute start to emphasize cultural and socio – historical contexts with eventually corresponding iconographic and iconological parameters. In this way, art history changed from a "connoisseur's pursuit into an academic discipline." But, in the main, both these attitudes to art history, so socially and intellectually exclusive, served only those relatively very few who, in one way or other, could afford the luxury of ownership, as well as of taste and interest in the arts. Art history and art appreciation were essentially, and largely still are elitist, in growing contrast to the democratic hopes and life styles which evolved after World War II. These latter have now swept the world, permitting and even demanding the general access to, and popularization of the arts and, in theoretical parallel, to

new approaches to art history. These have included marxist, socio – political, structural, feminist, gender, psychoanalytical, and diverse other strategies, quite loosely grouped under the indefinite term “the new art history,” each with their own specific – heavy-handed? – language(6).

The question which, however, comes to my mind is: should any kind of such art history have to be part of “democratized” appreciation of art? Also, should any work of art be accessible to the growing number of art viewers, listeners and readers only through populist interpretations or criticism? And if so, how profound can such ‘knowledges’ ever be? I fear that the damage done to a lasting appreciation of works of art by folksy, literal analyses and popularized (simplistic?) interpretations can be considerable. As far as I am concerned, true and lasting - yet still flexible - understanding and appreciation of art can come only from becoming increasingly familiar with a work by viewing, reading or listening to it directly in its specific context, and in conjunction with its distinct and specific associations. Such, I believe, could and should also be the goal – and the method – of any or all art education.

G.S.

NOTES

(1) Surely, feminism and sensuousness are not mutually exclusive. To me, feminism, since its very beginnings was a both sensitive and sensuous phenomenon.

(2) A passage which, with Williams’ sensuously compassionate but so often grim imagery, would not win him cudos from intransigent feminists.

(3) His linear adroitness recalls the sensuous incisiveness of Crivelli and Cosimo Tura but, with his not infrequent reliance on various collage techniques, he is equally reminiscent of the simultaneous and subliminal effects used in modern films.

(4) The Song of Solomon, 6, verse 10

(5) That Williams was Director of the School of Art from 1954 to 1973, taught here until 1987, and is Director Emeritus since 1992, is largely of biographical interest but had nothing to do with that exhibition. That he continued, and still continues to be an active artist, however, is of great importance.

(6) cf. THE NEW ART HISTORY by A.L. Rees and F. Borcello

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Adamson, Arthur Review article "Lady Day by Richard Williams: Traditional Iconoclast," Border Crossings, Summer 1986

Amundson, Dale Introduction to LADY DAY, University of Manitoba, Gallery 1.1.1., 1986



Dead Sea Find, 1988 oil stick on gesso coated masonite 122 x 188 cm Collection of the Artist

RICHARDEMERSONWILLIAMS

BORN

1921 Dormont, Pennsylvania

EDUCATION

1943 Carnegie Institute of Technology (Carnegie-Mellon University) B.A. in Sculpture

1954 The State University of Iowa, Iowa City
M.F.A (Printmaking)

POSITIONS

1946 – 1950 Assistant Professor of Art, Georgia
State College for Women (Georgia
College)

1954 – 1987 Professor, University of Manitoba
School of Art

1954 – 1973 Director School of Art, University of
Manitoba

1963 Charter Member of the Winnipeg Art
Gallery Board of Governors

1990 Director Emeritus, School of Art, U.of M.

1994 – present Founding member and regular
exhibitor at <SITE>Gallery, Winnipeg

GEORGESWINTON

C.M., B.A., LL.D., R.C.A.

Born in Vienna, Austria in 1917

Came to Canada in 1939

WILLIAMSRECENTSOLOEXHIBITIONS

1986 LADY DAY, Gallery 1.1.1. University of
Manitoba

1989 FLOWER FESTIVAL, St. John's Cathedral,
Winnipeg

1993 MARY HAD A DREAM Main/Access
Gallery, Winnipeg

RECENTGROUPEXHIBITIONS

1987 CONTEMPORARY ART IN MANITOBA
(Invitation) Winnipeg Art Gallery,
Halifax, Calgary, and Guelph, catalogue
by Shirley Madill

1990 UPDATE Winnipeg Artists, 1950s/1990
(Invitation) at the Winnipeg Art Gallery

1993 GRAND JURY II, EXHIBITION AND SALE
(Jury) at the Winnipeg Art Gallery

1994 THOSE WHO STAYED, Manitoba's School
of Art 1960-1970 (invitation), at Gallery
1.1.1., University of Manitoba

Served in the Canadian Army 1941 - 1946

Studied art in Montreal and New York

Taught art (studio and history) 1950 - 1984
(University of Manitoba 1954 - 1974)

Many solo exhibitions in Canada and U.S.A.

Author of three books on Inuit art

RICHARD WILLIAMS LIST OF WORKS IN EXHIBITION

1. **Little People**, 1943 (Magazine + Photo) various dimensions. Collection of the artist.
2. **Edge of the Garden**, 1953 etching 51.5 x 51.5 cm Collection of the artist.
3. **Winged Trumpeter**, 1954 sculpture of welded steel + wood 124.0 x 86.5 x 51.5 cm Collection of Dr. Kurt Williams
4. **Bridesmaid**, 1964 sculpture in plaster 33 x 39.4 x 21.6 cm Collection of the artist
5. **Sisters**, 1965-67 oil pastel on paper 66 x 50.8 cm Collection of the artist
6. **Bather**, 1970 graphite pencil on paper 53.5 x 28.0 cm Collection of the artist
7. **Hi Good Lookin'**, 1985 pastel on paper 30.5 x 24.2 cm Collection of the artist
8. **Love Letter**, 1985 conté crayon on paper 57.1 x 75.6 cm Collection of the Winnipeg Art Gallery
9. **Mary's Comet**, 1985 pastel on paper 103.5 x 148.7 cm Collection of the artist
10. **Shrine (Ostentatio Genitalium)**, 1985 conté crayon paper 21.6 x 22.9 cm Collection of the artist
11. **Good News/Good News**, 1985 carbon pencil and collage/paper 30.5 x 45.7 cm Collection of the artist
12. **Person to Person**, 1985 oil on canvas 122.0 x 183.0 cm Collection of Pauline A. Williams
13. **The Second Eve (Annunciation)**, 1987 acrylic on canvas 91.5 x 183.0 cm Collection of the artist
14. **Florida**, 1988 charcoal + collage on plywood 122.0 x 183.0 cm Collection of the artist
15. **Springtime**, 1988 charcoal on gesso coated masonite 122.0 x 183.0 cm Collection of the Manitoba Arts Council Art Bank
16. **Freedom Fighters**, 1986-87 carbon pencil on paper 24.2 x 31.7 cm Collection of the Manitoba Arts Council Art Bank
17. **Freedom Fighters II**, 1988 graphite on paper 31.7 x 24.2 cm Collection of the artist
18. **Die**, 1988 oil stick on gesso coated masonite 122.0 x 183.0 cm Collection of the artist
19. **Dead Sea Find**, 1988 oil stick on gesso coated masonite 122.0 x 183.0 cm Private Collection
20. **Differences**, 1989 coloured pencil + acrylic on gesso coated masonite 59.7 x 122.0 cm Collection of the artist
21. **The Scourging of Mary**, 1989 charcoal + acrylic on gesso coated masonite 59.7 x 122.0 cm Collection of the artist
22. **St. Augustine with Political Prisoners**, 1991 conté crayon + acrylic on gesso coated masonite 61.0 x 122.0 cm Collection of the Artist
23. **Earth Day**, 1991 acrylic on canvas 60.8 x 92 cm Collection of the artist
24. **Happy Birthday**, 1991 graphite + coloured pencil + collage 62.8 x 52.4 cm Collection of the artist
25. **Sons and Mothers**, 1992 oil stick + acrylic on gesso coated masonite 122.0 x 183.0 cm Collection of the artist
26. **Mary Had a Dream**, 1992 oil on canvas 91.5 x 122.0 cm Collection of the artist
27. **By the Book**, 1992 oil stick + acrylic on gesso coated masonite 122.0 x 183.0 cm Collection of the artist
28. **The Worm, the Woman and the Rose Garden**, 1993 oil stick + collage on masonite 122.0 x 61.0 cm Collection of the artist
29. **Flesh and Blood**, 1994 oil on masonite 119.4 x 304.8 cm Collection of the artist
30. **Howard Russell Pawley**, 1989 oil on canvas 152.4 x 122.0 cm Collection of the Province of Manitoba

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