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— A RETURN TO ART CRITICISM —

In the Studio with Didier William: “The Last Six Months Have Deeply Affected my Practice. I Came Back to the Body”

BY JASON STOPA SEPTEMBER 18, 2020

I met Didier William in the fall of 2018, when he came to Pratt Institute to critique our undergraduate students. Didier and I talked about our varied experiences as people of color in academia. He arrived in America as an immigrant from Haiti as a young child, born to parents who had a mistrust of white culture. I was born to an interracial couple – my father is white and my mother is Black; growing up, my family hardly ever talked about race. William



and I spoke on the phone in June, and as we both expressed rage and sorrow at the death of George Floyd, we also shared our thoughts about photos of police brutality on social media. In a year of massive social unrest and protest, it's incumbent upon us that we have a discussion surrounding the politics of visibility.

William is intimately involved in this conversation, which led to our discussing his recent work in the studio. Based in Philadelphia and teaching printmaking at Rutgers University, William makes multimedia paintings that communicate complex narratives about representation. He reminds us that throughout the 20th century, issues of representation in art were primarily framed as an ongoing debate with abstraction. William is instead interested in how and why a body is being represented, and the relationship between a subject and power. His paintings do not offer easy conclusions. The artist layers visual information, covering up and exposing in a manner of

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excavation. His bodies are covered in eyes and genderless. By concealing identifying characteristics in this way, the artist uses the body as a formal container of psychological states. In this interview, too, William peels back the lid.



In previous interviews you talk about the murder of Trayvon Martin as a turning point in your practice. You were previously making abstract paintings that were concerned with the surface qualities of pours and patterns. They were viscous and idiosyncratic, and bore a psychological intensity. The use of graphic color and spatial ambiguity is still evident in your recent work, but missing from that previous series was the use of the body as an arena of complex social issues. Your recent paintings use the body, its traumas and personal history, to reflect highly charged environments. Given the recent demonstrations of police brutality, I wonder how our current context has affected your ideas and work?

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Between the uprisings for racial justice and the pandemic, the last six months have deeply affected my practice. I came back to the body because I felt like there was a risk in not claiming the body as a contested site. Now, six months into this plague, and I think I'm understanding this moment as a sort of test for what representation can and can't do. I have, of course, always been interested in representation and its ability to image and affirm a particular kind of presence. But at moments like this, the consequences of seeing and being seen feel so close to the surface. Not being able to touch each other and hug one another has me thinking not only about the tragedy of disembodiment but whether or not that tragedy can be turned into a kind of triumph. For me, it's not unrelated to the familial ways in which we try to access ancestral memory and the intimate systems of inherited trauma. There's a specific kind of disembodiment there that Black people in particular have had to contend with for generations. Lives lost. Stories forgotten. Entire family lines eradicated. Often times in my work I'm thinking specifically about the consequences of immigration, but the ruptures caused by the slave trade belong in this conversation, as well. And yet we've had to figure out ways to persist, find agency and security, and continue building. Even when the body fails. And it always does.

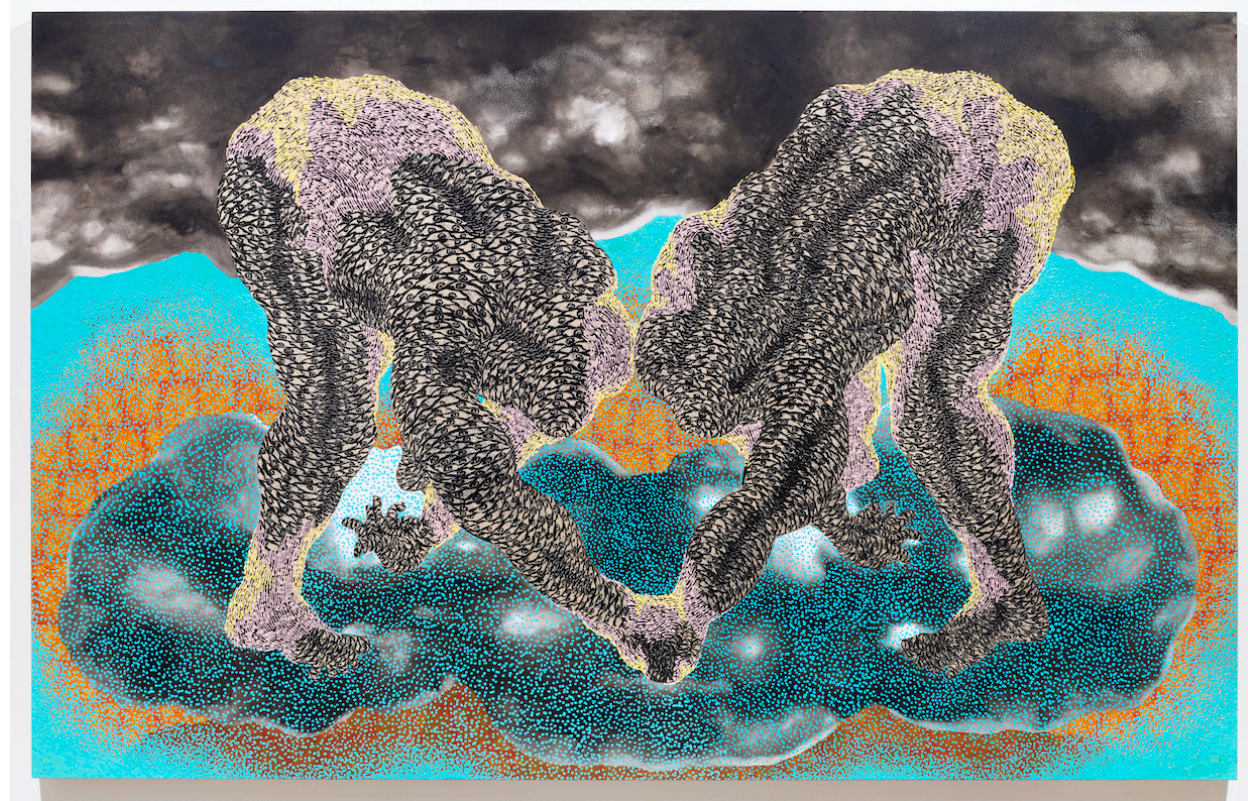
Your work seems poised to address the psychological residue left in its wake. There is no shortage of contemporary painters addressing identity and social issues. One of the more compelling qualities in your work is how you address the body as a contested site, and how representation can make this issue explicit, as opposed to merely capturing a likeness or aestheticizing the body.

How has quarantine affected your studio practice? Are you able to work in the studio regularly? Are you doing any reading or research in addition to painting?

Thankfully, I'm still able to get to my studio. I live in Philadelphia, and our building was completely shut down to the public, but our private studio spaces were still available and accessible. In the beginning of all of this, going to the studio felt incredibly strange, and I was too distracted most of the time to get any work done. It's a bit better now. I've been researching early 19th-century landscape paintings by people like J.M.W. Turner, Gainsborough, and Alexander Cozens for this current body of work. I'm very interested in cloudscapes and sky formations inspired by some of these paintings. And I'm compelled by this moment in particular because these works were being produced concurrently with the Haitian Revolution. A question I return to often in the paintings is: where does the retroactive imagination coincide with real time, and what kind of

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resultant reality is constructed in doing so? For me, this is a question that certainly underscores a broader immigrant narrative, but one that I've also been personally invested in with regard to my relationship to Haiti, where I was born. I've also been rereading some Baldwin, especially *Jimmy's Blues*, his book of poetry. And I just picked up *Create Dangerously* by Edwidge Danticat.



Gainsborough is a complicated figure to latch onto. His work deviates from the classical; his subjects wear contemporary, fashionable clothing. His cloud formations are wispy, sentimental, and don't quite point toward the heavens. Rather, they are grounded in a material landscape. Meanwhile, the British were always trying to maintain colonial rule, even attacking the French during the French Revolutionary Wars in a bid for dominance in Haiti. Gainsborough's work affirms the prevailing English sensibilities of the day, which were seemingly refined, yet horribly destructive.

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Your work is quasi-representational, but unlike those trying to get away from literal content, your imagery appears symbolic. In an interview in 2015, you stated that the viewer “is never really let off the hook in terms of becoming specifically aware of how their gaze is gendering or racializing the figures.” Do you feel that once a viewer identifies with a figure in a painting, that bias invariably comes in? Is the body always implicated in a social and political context?

The short answer to that is yes. I think the human form is probably the most empathic symbol in all of visual history, and so invariably when we gaze onto an image of a body we want to identify it, we want to familiarize ourselves with it, and we naturally want to see ourselves in the image. Our curiosity, however, is enmeshed with a good amount of narcissism. Not only is that hard to get away from; it also brings along with it accumulated cultural baggage that reshapes the body in front of us into something our psyche can handle, for better or worse.

I'd also like to distinguish between “the figure” and “the body.” These terms are often used interchangeably, and I don't think they should be. Even if we consider “the figure” to be an art-historical construct, a specifically codified conceptual device, it's still quite limited by the white-supremacist frame of the Western canon. I prefer to think about the body as a living biological structure; a time-based symbol; a constantly fluctuating site-specific condition that is never politically or socially neutral.

This highlights the ever-shifting political nature of representation. Your paintings prompt a two-fold question: how is this body depicted and why is this body depicted? By way of contradiction, those two aspects come together to create a rich, more complex narrative. You often depict non-gendered bodies whose skin is covered with lots of small, piercing eyes. The politics of visibility is apparent here. The bodies have eyes, but don't possess faces that can gaze back in a traditional way. Are they disinterested bodies? Is this a way to flip power?

Are they disinterested bodies? No, quite the opposite. Their probing gaze is constant, confrontational, and unyielding. To the extent that power can be understood as a way of knowing through looking, then, sure, there is an inversion of power here. But maybe even more than that, what they encourage is a kind of knowing that doesn't come from static representational devices. A kind of knowing that is intergenerational, cross-cultural, unbounded, and transnational. For me this is analogous to the lived realities of

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many of us in the diaspora. The primary question for me has always been, what happens to the body formed in that very specific time/space condition?

And to answer the last part of the question, the audience is absolutely implicated here. Particularly with my newest body of work, I'm interested in the unit that breaks down and accumulates to form different parts of the painting. The eye motif was the beginning of that way of working in the way that it somewhat forms a cross contour. That strategy has begun to invade other parts of the image as well. Certainly, part of the way meaning is constructed has to do with boundaries and codes viewers themselves bring to the work.



Speaking of audiences and stages, your work has a relationship to theater. Your 2018 show at James Fuentes Gallery was titled *Curtains, Stages, and Shadows*. Does the use of a stage have a relationship to the entertainment purposes that Black and brown bodies have historically performed? Minstrel shows? The NBA? Do your bodies have a different kind of agency and autonomy?

Well, yes, but not specifically in the way that you're describing. I'm interested in the politics of performance, because I have a strong distrust in words like "authentic" – specifically, in the ways that that kind traditional storytelling sometimes tends to promote a singular narrative. Speaking personally, my own family history doesn't go back very far before the narratives become compromised by myth, eroding memories, immigration, and conflict; and written records are few and far between. It's far less important to me to try to distinguish "Truths" and "Untruths" and more important for me to think critically about the function of these stories. What do they offer the storyteller? What do they offer the listener? What kind of agency do they allow that wasn't there prior? What kinds of manipulations are they working to engineer? I think in order to make this system legible, the language of performance and theater proves useful. We fully understand it to be a contrived and highly calibrated interaction but of course it is no less real. No less present. No less felt.

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The distrust of the “authentic” feels like our inheritance from postmodernism, but rather than slipping into irony and nihilism or espousing sincerity as the only virtue, there is a middleground that allows for a more complex audience/maker relationship. I can think of a few examples of painting that feel performative. I see it in the work of Jutta Koether, Torkwase Dyson, Neo Rauch, and Michael Armitage. Each one of these artists has an interest in cultural history and the history of painting, and pits the two against each other to get somewhere new. Would you say that you are a painter of history, one that is not neat and linear?

Yes, but only if we accept the fact that myth, oratory, and ritual hold ample weight within an archived historical narrative. Culturally, that’s the relationship to history that has provided places like Haiti with so much agency. But even personally, that’s the relationship to history that I’ve had no choice but to contend with. My Blackness is rooted in an ancestral relationship to the Caribbean and an adopted relationship to thåe United States. The negotiations implied therein are fruitful, powerful, and potent. They govern every single part of my life. Working to make those linkages is the only thing that feels completely present in an untidy narrative that never quite resolves.

