

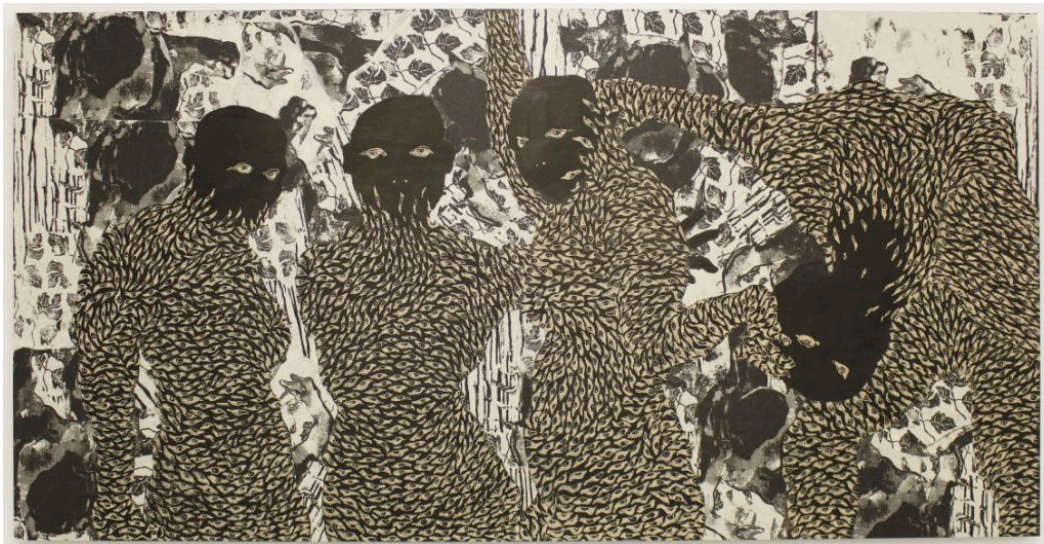
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TWO COATS OF PAINT

Didier William: The unblinking eye

November 6, 2017 contributed by Sharon Butler

Stopping by Didier William's studio in Philadelphia recently, I was surprised and impressed to find that his colorful abstract paintings had taken a darker, more figurative turn. Born in Haiti in 1983 and raised in Miami, William told me that since the Trayvon Martin killing, he has felt a new urgency to communicate his ideas and anxieties in a more deliberate and straightforward way than abstraction allowed. The disastrous American presidential election a year ago affirmed and amplified that urgency. In "We Will Win," his solo show on view at Tiger Strikes Asteroid New York, William presents plaintive new work that combines art-historical references and traditional techniques such as wood carving, printmaking, and collage in a moving, constructively confrontational narrative.



Drawing on sources such as Jacques-Louis David's 1793 masterpiece *The Death of Marat*, carved and inked black figures emerge from swarms of writhing, fish-like eyes, with decorative woodcut prints and drawings collaged onto incised wooden panels. The figures are both conjured and replaced by these schools of unblinking eyes. For me, these powerful paintings also reference Gustav Klimt's decorative patterning and, among contemporary artists, the

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densely layered figurative collages of Njideka Akunyili Crosby, a Nigerian-born artist who came to the United States at the turn of the century and received a Post-Baccalaureate certificate in 2006 from The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, where William now leads the MFA Program.

Other influences include Jacob Lawrence, whose reductive figurative paintings document important events in African-American history, and, perhaps less overtly, Barkley Hendricks and Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, who likewise have appropriated and updated portraiture tropes from the art-historical canon. William builds on their work by exploring and developing the power of the gaze to conjure and distort.

In addition, William's eye motif recalls an early Kerry James Marshall painting, on view in his retrospective at The Met Breuer, that depicts a deep black figure against an almost equally dark background, the most visible feature being a pair of watchful eyes. Like Marshall, William is driven to revise not merely art history, but also American history writ large, which for too long has under-appreciated the cultural and political contributions of the nation's black community. With this forceful new direction, William has audaciously advanced that cause.

