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ARTNEWS

'Images of Existential Crisis Almost Look Cute to Us Now': A Talk with Michael Williams

By Bill Powers | December 3, 2014



Michael Williams.

Bill Powers: You are in the new painting survey at MoMA this winter. Do you plan to include a particular series?

Michael Williams: I'm going to include three inkjet paintings with airbrush and oil or acrylic.

BP: Some of these vertical paintings of yours seem to have started as horizontals, is that right?

MW: Yes, I like to equate it to watching TV while you're lying down on the couch. You are receiving this image sideways, but you somehow make the mental adjustment in your head—turning everything right way up. In that process I think the images don't penetrate your brain quite as deeply as they would if you'd been sitting up properly. I think that's interesting.

BP: Isn't that the opposite of what you want as an artist? Don't you want your paintings to sear into the viewer's memory?

MW: No, not at all. I'm not interested in propaganda. I'm more concerned with the experience of viewing a painting. And I'm obsessed with trying to understand seeing, and that for me means trying to create image fields which are difficult to see and which make it difficult to understand what you're seeing. I don't want the viewer to just register what's in front of them. It should be more mysterious than that.

BP: Tell me about this painting of a guy wearing rollerblades reading a "cool magazine."

MW: Well, originally I made the image in Photoshop and then had it printed on that canvas. I use a Wacom Tablet and pen to make the drawings. It's not like drawing with a mouse. You can control the softness of your lines. And you can erase what you've done at any stage, and moving layers backwards and forwards.

BP: And is this how you've always worked?

MW: No. Usually when I'm working on paintings I'm also working on some sort of side "hobby"—collages or drawings. Something to do when I'm bored of painting. This is how drawing on the computer started. Then I thought to have one of these things printed on canvas and I found it was a fertile area for me to work.

BP: Like something to work against?

MW: Yeah. Seeing my images transfer from screen to canvas is sometimes appalling. So painting on top of the prints is a way to address imagery that maybe feels foolish or embarrassing and to somehow relieve it of those qualities by trying to bring a deeper presence—it's like a process of reverse levity. More and more though now, I'm finding a way to be happy with the final printed image.

BP: Is that rollerblade painting meant to be a self-portrait?

MW: Regrettably I think it might be. I'm sort of haunted by the apathy of recent generations of Americans. That and the devastation of the Earth. But with that painting I think I'm simultaneously accusing and forgiving my culture and myself.

BP: I want to ask you about some of your titles. What is *Ikea Be Here Now* meant to refer to?

MW: *Be Here Now* is a book by Ram Dass. It was a popular spirituality text in the early 1970s.

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BP: So is the title then about the commercialization of spirituality?

MW: Yeah, but it stemmed from something my wife texted me because the cabinetry we ordered had just been dropped off at the house.

BP: Did your show last spring at Eva Presenhuber have an extra-terrestrial theme?

MW: There was one painting of a UFO beaming up a mushroom. I realized that the shape of a UFO with its beam was the same shape as a mushroom. I liked the similarity in shapes and the pairing of connotations.

BP: And didn't I see another painting of an alien opening a door?

MW: That was more of an existential crisis painting. I think of existentialism as a problem from our grandparents' generation. Images of existential crisis almost look cute to us now. Why am I here? It doesn't feel like a problem for our time. So paintings like that one are taking an almost patronizing glance at the dark night of the soul.

BP: Do you have a mild obsession with Utrecht?

MW: Well, I did a painting of a Utrecht storefront and called it "Hundreds of Dollars of Meditation Equipment." I was thinking about the proliferation of art supply stores, and that in a privileged society there is great demand for art supplies and yoga mats.

BP: It's funny that you once worked for Matthew Barney because your art is so radically different from what he does.

MW: Well, we aren't living in the days of master and apprentice.

BP: What did you learn from being an artist's assistant?

MW: Before Matthew Barney, I worked in Vito Acconci's studio. I suppose I picked up a work ethic from those guys. I remember one night sleeping on the floor of Vito's studio for two hours, then getting up to finish this architectural model for a parking garage with a park on the roof which we'd been working on for a few weeks. The day came to ship it out and we were all still super-gluing pieces onto it as these guys in FedEx uniforms were ominously closing the lid of the crate.