

**Michael Williams**

PILING

November 7 – December 13, 2025

Los Angeles

Press Release

David Kordansky Gallery is pleased to present *PILING*, an exhibition of new paintings and drawings by Michael Williams. The focus of the show is a series of seven interrelated paintings, rooted in visual observation and the still life genre, in which Williams turns his eye to the physical and emotional space of the painting studio and the objects, light, and questions that occupy it. The exhibition is on view at 5130 W. Edgewood Pl. in Los Angeles from November 7 through December 13, 2025. An opening reception will take place on Friday, November 7 from 6 to 8 PM.

The paintings in *PILING* depict a variably identifiable space in which certain objects—a table, a golf bag, a food co-op ID, a chair—appear in different ways and juxtapositions. The canvases also share a common palette in which lavender, peach, and grey tones predominate. Within this seemingly limited range of attributes, however, Williams conjures fields of textures, marks, and forms that resist easy description or characterization. To make the series, he began with a first painting of a studio still life scene; subsequent paintings include images of the previous ones, which become more and less recognizable depending on his intuitive responses to each work as it evolved.

This process, which is somehow both linear and non-linear, is emblematic of Williams's two-decade trajectory and the many different—and sometimes seemingly contradictory—modes he has used to make paintings. He has availed himself of traditional acrylic and oil paints, pens and pencils, computers and inkjet printers, and many kinds of actual and implied collage. Similarly, his subject matter has included everything from overarching themes of global importance to the minutiae of his own life, and it has been rendered with dead-serious forays into abstraction and formalism as well as palpable doses of humor.

Drawing, with its potential for material directness and formal diversity, has played an important role in Williams's work since the beginning of his career. Accordingly, the drawings that appear in *PILING* reflect the ways in which Williams challenges himself to question the most basic and foundational pretenses that guide the production of art, with special attention paid to his own ideas, habits, and view of the world.

Conversation between Michael Williams and Stuart Krimko in the artist's studio, Los Angeles, August 25, 2025:

SK: So what's going on in here?

MW: Well, it's a very traditional idea, to make a still life painting with objects in a space. But then, once I finish a painting, that painting becomes one of the objects in the space. So the paintings end up in the backgrounds of the other paintings, and as that continues to happen, the images churn into themselves. The same objects show up multiple times in one picture, a represented version and an observed version.

SK: There's a figure in some of the paintings. Did you use a mirror at some point?

MW: No. I had a life-size dummy that I dressed up in my painting clothes.

SK: The recognizable elements in the paintings can also fall apart pretty fast. It's not always clear what's what.

MW: Yeah, they're representational in theory. For each painting, I start by making a still life drawing that's totally observational, but then the painting that is made after that drawing is more representative of the drawing than it is of the objects that the drawing represents. The starting place is what I'm seeing, but then once I start painting, other ideas start happening. And strategies I know from making abstract paintings are admissible.

SK: So you set up the objects and you have the idea to make a series of paintings that follow a procedure, more or less. Maybe not a procedure, exactly, but on the one hand, there's a linear path because the paintings happen in a sequence and are related to the others that came before them. But once that procedure is out of the way, the decision-making in the paintings themselves feels very non-artificial and intuitive. You could write an email to me explaining the idea, but the colors, the shapes, the textures on the canvases can't be traced in such a clear way.

MW: Right, if I were to realize the same idea using photography, it would be a completely different experience. I think with painting, it's always about having somewhere to start and then that can get thrown away pretty quickly, and then you're just painting. Whatever's been done historically has been done, and I've done whatever I've done. That makes it harder to find a way forward. I'm way past overthinking it. So you have to take whatever you can find, it almost doesn't matter. And then you just run with it, and then you're moving anyway.

SK: In each painting, it becomes about the way the paint relates to itself across the canvas. Still life and the analytical approach to it in Cubism, let's say, are often about perception, but there's something different about what's under observation here.

MW: Well, I did a residency five or six years ago, and whenever I do that kind of thing, I typically end up making something that doesn't seem to have anything to do with what I've been making before, or what I make after. And then I spend the next five years trying to figure out why the hell I did that and how it relates to what I am or have been doing. On that residency I spent two months making a bunch of small still lifes. Very traditional observational paintings, really looking at something and painting it. A bucket, a fan, a shoe, whatever was around. I was thinking a lot about how so much of the painting that is happening now is not based in observation. So much painting is from the mind's eye rather than the actual eye. Instead of painting what we're seeing we're painting what we're thinking. And that's a shift towards the self, making the individual self the important thing, not the observable world, our society, our community, etc.

SK: The drawing aspect of this seems important, here and in your work in general. Maybe it's something about drawing being a more basic, informal way of making art. Just looking at something and drawing it.

MW: I think there's something honest and generous about working observationally, looking at it and drawing it, and I'm including one of the source drawings for the paintings in the show. But I'm also including a selection of other recent, seemingly unrelated drawings. It's a way to mix in another approach. In some of the paintings, there's a sheet of paper in the background with a text that says, "If you don't want to draw today, don't draw for the next two years." That's kind of what happened to me after I made this big survey show of my drawings a few years ago. I lost the nerve to continue as I had done. And that's when I decided to make observational paintings, because it felt like I couldn't draw the way I had anymore.

SK: On one hand, there's something pretty funny about that text. But in terms of your life and work, it has had pretty serious implications.

MW: Humor is almost like my functioning principle as a person. And I am not against it being in my art, but when I saw these 250 drawings together from the past twenty years, I just thought, "Well, what if I remove this dominant trait from my work?" And over the last couple of years, I just decided, okay, I'm not going to do anything goofy for the foreseeable future. I'm going to see what happens if I remove this thing that has been so central to my work. But then the thing that happens is that the new paintings are still somehow humorous. You can't get away from it. I can't remember who, but somebody said, "All my serious paintings are funnier than people think, and my funny paintings are more serious than people think." I can relate almost exactly to that. It's possible I'm the one who said it. (Haha.) It goes back to this thing that I'm always aware of: I never want anything to be able to sit in a static space. I want everything to defy its function.

SK: At the end of the day, these are individual paintings, and they need to be understood on their own terms, but there's something open-ended about them that, well, I guess defies that. Maybe it's because they're also speaking to what you've already done and what you might do in the future.

MW: Yeah. I mean, I always feel like I'm at a complete dead end and that whatever I've just done, I don't know how it can continue. But then I usually manage to find something more to do. But it's a very hard time to know what to do. It feels absurd to make a painting that's not about what's happening, but it feels silly to make a painting about what's happening.

Michael Williams (b. 1978, Doylestown, PA) has been the subject of solo and two-person exhibitions at the Power Station, Dallas (2022); LOK, the Kunstzone in the Lokremise, Kunstmuseum St.Gallen, Switzerland (2021); Le Consortium, Dijon, France (with Tobias Pils, 2017); Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh (2017); Musée des Beaux-Arts de Montréal (2015); and Gallery Met, New York (2015). Recent group shows include *Day for Night: New American Realism*, Palazzo Barberini, organized by the Aishti Foundation, Rome (2024); *.paint*, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago (2020); *Joe Bradley, Oscar Tuazon, Michael Williams*, Brant Foundation Art Study Center, Greenwich, Connecticut (2018); *The Trick Brain*, Aishti Foundation, Beirut (2017–2018); *High Anxiety: New Acquisitions*, Rubell Family Collection, Miami (2016); *Artists and Poets*, Secession, Vienna (2015); and *The Forever Now: Contemporary Painting in an Atemporal World*, Museum of Modern Art, New York (2014). His work is in the permanent collections of institutions including The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Dallas Museum of Art; and Musée des Beaux-Arts de Montréal. Williams lives and works in Los Angeles.