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LUCK OF THE DRAW

DAN NADEL ON THE ART OF MICHAEL WILLIAMS

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Opposite page: **Michael Williams, *PuzzledDAD series (5)*, 2016,** oil and acrylic on linen, 36 × 48". From the series “PuzzledDAD series,” 2015–16.

This page: **Michael Williams, *PuzzledDAD series (2)*, 2015,** acrylic, ink, and oil on linen, 36 × 48". From the series “PuzzledDAD series,” 2015–16.

ONE OF THE BETTER DESCRIPTIONS of Michael Williams’s vision of painting comes from the artist himself. At the end of a fairly exhausting studio visit earlier this year, I asked him whether he had faith in a grand notion of art—something to which most artists decidedly would not admit. He replied:

> I do have a great belief in art, but I’m not as in touch with that as I was when I was thirteen. There is something mystical about making art and paintings. Alone in the studio making a painting can be a strange time. Moving around weirdly, doing weird things. I like the idea of being more purposeful. Sometimes you have to believe in the magic of the thing. I’ve seen a painting just finish itself. You can get excited about a painting, risk ruining it, and there’s this energy and it’s *No, you didn’t ruin a painting, you finished a painting*. You have to honor that moment in order for the painting to survive until the next morning.

Williams is a romantic, and knowingly so. His uncynical but not at all naive description of making art goes some way toward explaining a painting like *We’d Better Get My Prius*, 2013. In it, a bumpkin in clownishly big shoes throws a pair of dice off a pier into the water. The image is ink-jet-printed on canvas, its borders uneven and askew. The bumpkin might have only one leg, a lumpen mass of the pastel purple that appears in so much of Williams’s work, and one enormous hand, which is etched with a maze of lines and forms; the dice he drops are bulbous, fleshy, pixelated things. The water is a glassy surface with smoky digital trails, and the air has the artificial brightness of a computer monitor. Familiar in its hue, but strange in its attempt at real and breathable space, *We’d Better Get My Prius* invites us in only to unmoor us.

What is this painting? Squint, and you might place it in the great American tradition of portrait and landscape painting, as though the boldness and grace of Marsden Hartley’s *Madawaska, Acadian Light-Heavy, Third Arrangement*, 1940, and *Granite by the Sea*, 1937, were melded together and filtered on Snapchat. Like Hartley, Williams is unafraid to appear foolish, emotional, naked. That is the risk in making art that takes particulars and then projects universals onto them—in this case, the foolishness of chance, the horror of being in one’s own body, and the clanging transition between beauty and ugliness. Another layer in the work is the artist’s non sequitur title, a one-line poem that nods at the offhand disposability of everything. Our fool and his symbol of comfortably conscientious living are not to be dismissed so easily, though. A Prius is a good thing, right? Maybe we still have to chuckle just to get comfortable with the contradictions of what this figure has to lose.

And that chuckle brings us to even more recent art references for Williams’s work. The darkly funny cultural and narrative scrawl of Peter Saul depends on unembarrassed specificity and a blending of the personal and the social, with Saul himself appearing—as Williams does—in his own paintings. Maria Lassnig’s passionately painted bodily distortions and science-

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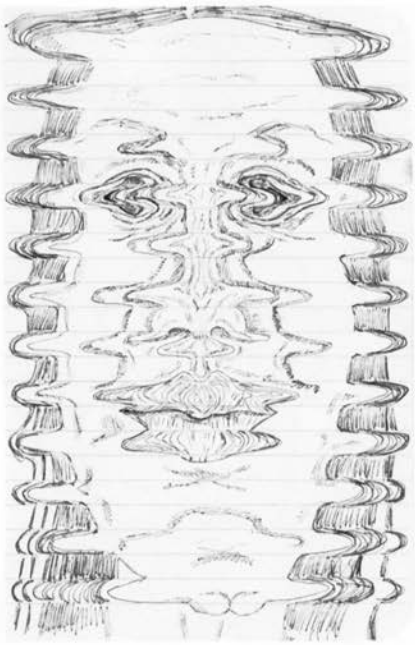

fiction leanings offer a model for a loosening and personalizing of Williams's brush techniques. And finally, the omnivorous, virtuosic paintings of Albert Oehlen, which often seem to contain multiple, even conflicting ideas on a single canvas, have offered a tool kit not only for blending digital and analog but also for fearlessly developing modes of painting in public, which can be a painful process for many.

But Williams is foremost, like Hartley, an observational painter. His minute, obsessive digital brushwork (think of the worlds within that lug's hand) and palette convert perceptual experience into intimate detail, as if each painterly incident could somehow, in some small way, gesture toward the overwhelming rush of the universe. *We'd Better Get My Prius* merges image, title, and mode of presentation via Williams's idea that our every experience is mediated through *filters*: the material, verbal, virtual, and bodily layers that literally color our perception.

And so external, environmental filters become actual compositional filters in the painting itself. It's as if, looking at the work, one can trace these pictorial effects outward, back into the world: starting from the literal grid of the work (sometimes rendered as a jigsaw puzzle); to the rendering of artificial or bright light, as if registering the layer of our digital screens; and finally to the painterly rendition of those everyday, less-than-vernacular symbols—default typefaces, bumper stickers, patio tiles, fences—that surround us, so ubiquitous as to be unnoticed, yet to which we attach constant, near-subliminal meaning.

WILLIAMS HAS ALSO ESTABLISHED a kind of filtration process—set working procedures that generate or alter images in order to elucidate or encode meaning. In every case, his robustly layered imagery and its variations stem from his approach to drawing, whether analog or digital, which has been a central component of his painting for more than a decade.

Williams's drawings fall into a number of categories: accumulated doodles from which he pulls images or compositional accidents; straightforward representational drawings; precise and brightly colored cartoons that closely relate to his image-primary paintings; “skip drawings,” wherein Williams draws an image on every other line of sheets of ruled paper, and then fills in the blank lines with whatever he likes (these became paintings in a 2015 show at the Metropolitan Opera in New York, “Tribal Frog Tattoo”); and procedural drawings showcased in a series of zines. Each drawing responds to a set rule: Drawings done on top of a sketchbook for fashion designers relate to the bodily forms printed on each page (the zine *How to Ruin an Omelet* [2016]); drawings extend cutout photographs (in the zines *Northern California Land for Sale !!* [2015] and *Yoga Online* [2014]); or drawings embellish the bleed left by a Sharpie on a notebook page (the zine *Things You Shouldn't Understand* [2017]). Most relevant to his current paintings are digital drawings made with a Wacom tablet in Photoshop and his “puzzle drawings.” Williams uses Photoshop in ways that go against the grain of raster graphics; the vector-based Illustrator, for example, would be better suited to rendering precise forms and textures, to make obviously pixelated and lo-fi images and lines, and to delineate the aforementioned ur-generic symbols of perfect picnic tables, tiles, roofs, shrubbery. The puzzle drawings, which are generally graphite or pen on paper, come about through a process in which Williams makes a drawing of an image and then cuts out generic-looking jigsaw-puzzle shapes from it. On a sheet placed underneath what's left, he continues the drawing.

The puzzle drawings play into Williams's current work in a few ways. Using his pencil renderings as reference, Williams might redraw the jigsaw lines in Photoshop and then map them onto an extant image, either to elucidate or to obscure. Alternately, Williams will make an oil or acrylic painting using a puzzle sheet as compositional or conceptual inspiration. When working entirely digitally, he might arrive at a satisfactory digital file that could be scaled up to work on canvas, but then mediate that by printing it different ways—altering a border, changing the aspect ratio, producing only half the image, or deleting a section. Unlike, say, working with oil or acrylic paints, when working with an image in Photoshop each filter, each

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Opposite page, from left: **Michael Williams, *untitled skip drawing*, 2009**, pen on paper, 8 ½ × 5 ½". **Michael Williams, *untitled puzzle drawing*, 2015**, pen and collage on paper, 12 × 9".

This page, clockwise, from right: **Michael Williams, *We'd Better Get My Prius*, 2013**, ink-jet print on canvas, 96 × 75". **Marsden Hartley, *Granite by the Sea*, 1937**, oil and ink on board, 20 ⅛ × 28 ¼". **Marsden Hartley, *Madawaska, Acadian Light-Heavy, Third Arrangement*, 1940**, oil on board, 27 ⅞ × 21 ¾".

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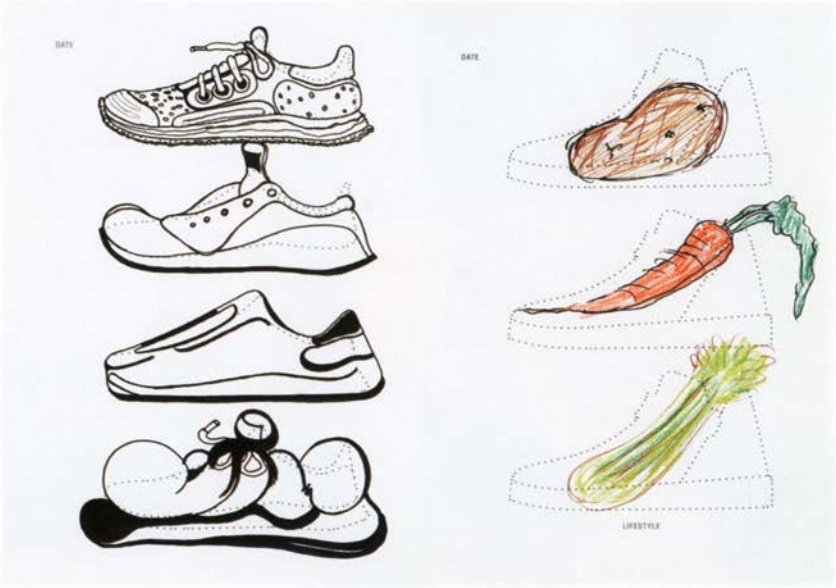

Above: **Spread from Michael Williams's *How to Ruin an Omelet* 2016**, offset prints, stapled, 11¼ × 16¼".

Left: **Michael Williams, *Haus*, 2010**, oil and acrylic on canvas, 80 × 60".

layer of manipulation, is registered as a history of actions that can be isolated or undone. These successive palimpsests of transformation are one way in which, perhaps, Williams gets to what he calls “the magic of the thing,” their unfolding into the larger visual sphere so that he's “seen a painting just finish itself.”

WILLIAMS GREW UP IN HOLICONG, Pennsylvania, and Providence, Rhode Island, and graduated from Washington University in St. Louis in 2000 with a BFA in sculpture. On trips home to Providence, he encountered the noise, graphics, and art scene revolving around Fort Thunder, the 1990s and early-aughts live-work warehouse space that hosted underground music and performance events. In New York, he worked as an assistant to Vito Acconci, and Matthew Barney.

At CANADA gallery in New York in 2007, where he held his first solo exhibition of paintings (three would follow), he was the youngest of its core group of painters, among them Joe Bradley (with whom he briefly shared a studio space in Greenpoint), Brian Belott, and Katherine Bernhardt. At a moment when so much art in New York seemed to flow neatly and politely out of graduate school and into galleries, these artists, and CANADA itself, represented an informal rebuke. Serious about their practices, which were funny, omnivorous, and resolutely weird, they were dedicated not to advancing their careers or specific ideas of what art could be, but to stubbornly making gut-level work. And they were all bound by an interest in drawing outside of its typical academic strictures, particularly as found in the work of other artists they admired, such as Jason Fox and Chris Martin. Williams, like the rest of this loose group, was interested in the commercial visual language all around him—video games, sticker graphics, magazines, and logos, as well as underground zines and music.

After a few years of making Surrealist-inflected paintings, Williams in 2010 took a cue from his puzzle drawings and began to disassemble his pictures into what became the puzzle paintings, which use jigsaw forms to disrupt conventional readings. “How something is painted is a metaphor for a way to be a person,” Williams told me. “If you're painting really wildly and vigorously, you're suggesting that kind of approach to life. As a viewer I like to decode things. It's a passage to seeing what happened.” The puzzles underpin what the artist now refers to as his “noodle paintings” begun in 2011—airbrush-and-oil works in which image is layered on image so that each emerges visible, like a double-exposed slide show, one signifier after another, creating a kind of visual stew on a heavily worked, often beige ground.

In 2012, Williams printed out a collage he had made in Photoshop to paint over it. From here, it was

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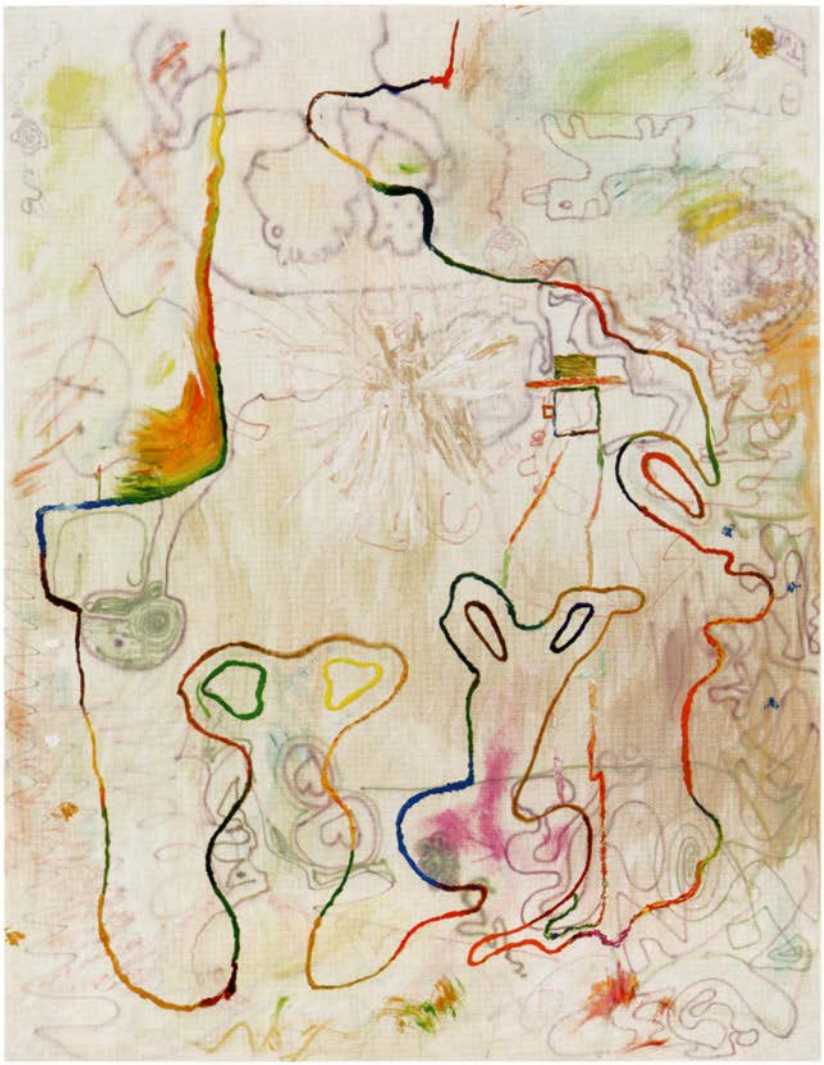

Michael Williams, *The Man Who Sees Everything*, 2011, airbrush and oil on canvas, 69 × 54".

Williams converts perceptual experience into intimate detail, as if each painterly incident could somehow, in some small way, gesture toward the overwhelming rush of the universe.

a natural jump to incorporate the digital within his paintings. “For me, oftentimes, I’m painting for a long time,” he notes, “before I feel I can really start making the painting. Until the painting is covered with paint, decisions about where it’s going to go don’t even happen. By having ink jet, it’s like you’re starting from that paint-covered-canvas point.” Sometimes, the under-image disappears entirely. For a 2016 show in Brussels at Gladstone Gallery, Williams used the image from a digital piece, *DAD*, 2014, as the basis of intensely worked puzzle paintings that left only a little bit of the original image in view. Here, we see the artist engaging with the content of the image as a way of generating the puzzle: The changes to *DAD*, as indicated by the Photoshop pop-up box floating over what appears to be the titular subject, are about to be saved or about to be canceled. The resultant paintings don’t make clear which option was chosen, but do meditate on where the various choices might lead.

TWO SHOWS of Williams’s paintings opening this month, at the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh, and at Gladstone Gallery in New York, seem to each have a baseline image. At Gladstone, it is *New Field*, 2016, which pictures a digitally drawn vertical Los Angeles hillside from the perspective of a backyard not dissimilar to the artist’s (and with a shadowy male figure who could be read as the artist in the foreground), placed on white and sandwiched between each half of a vertically elongated smiley face. He assembles the image like an ill-fitting puzzle, with pieces scrunched up and overlapping, using sleek, metallic graphic grooves in thinly applied, translucent colors: green, purple, pink, and ocher. This lattice becomes a way to mark his own visual and emotional impressions and to map, extend, and become the picture. Williams achieves this graphic device by transferring his puzzle drawings to canvas with thin pencil lines. The painted pathways on the canvas give you a false sense of direction—you can follow them up and onto a patio on the right, hoping for a stable means to read the picture, but the lines then round the corner and drop your eyes into a void. Other traces resolve at one moment into a woman smoking, and at another into what looks like circuits. Above the tan wooden fence that divides the picture is a moment of black graphic chaos, as a delicate skein of paint suddenly explodes in frantic (but still thin) strokes. What becomes clear in *New Field* is that there is no primary and secondary image, only a simultaneity of consciousness put through multiple filters: of noticing things and being surveilled, of adding and subtracting, of hope and fear.

A digital-only version of the imagery from *New Field* pops up at the Carnegie in *Yard Waste*, 2017, which has

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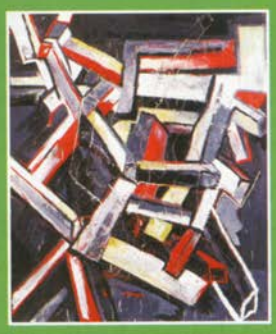
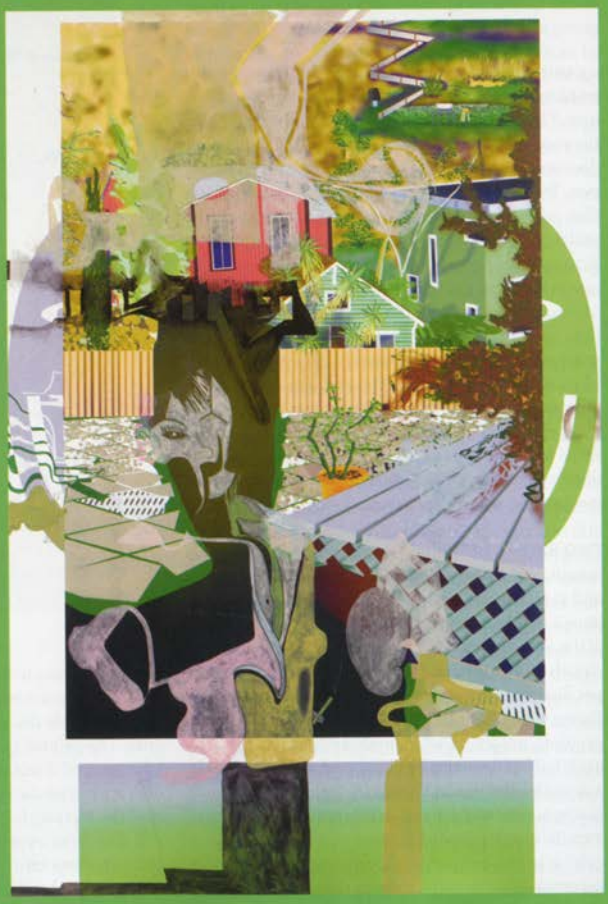
Clockwise, from top left: **Michael Williams, *Untitled Gourd*, 2016,** oil and ink-jet print on canvas, 10' 2" × 7' 4". **Martin Kippenberger, *With the Best Will in the World, I Can't See a Swastika*, 1984,** oil and plastic on canvas, 63 × 52 ¼". **Michael Williams, *New Field*, 2016,** oil, acrylic, and ink-jet print on canvas, 10' 2" × 6' 10½". **Michael Williams, *DAD*, 2014,** ink-jet print on canvas, 26 × 32".





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There is nothing for us to do but project ourselves into Williams's image and wonder at the loneliness of our position.

Michael Williams, Goose 9, 2015, ink-jet print, oil, and pastel on canvas, 60 × 48".

the shadow figure far larger—a ghostly, magenta-and-green-infused black blotting out the landscape. Now we can get a better look at the objects within the painting, including shrubbery that looks like pixelated thumbprints and a tree of green and black scribbles. Aside from touring this new landscape, there is nothing for us to do but project ourselves into this image and wonder at the loneliness of our position.

Another painting at Gladstone, *Vertical Composition*, 2017, empties out the backyard, save for the zigzag of a fence up the hillside, and adds an outline of a figure and the word COEXIST, written as a variation on graphic designer Piotr Młodożeniec's famous image-word, across the center. All of this is upside down, reflecting what I imagine the world looks like to my five-year-old son when I hold him up by his ankles, head dangling just above the floor. These are the physical operations that Williams's filters can perform in service to meaning: silhouetting, tracing, layering, rotating.

COEXIST, like the yin-yang symbol, appears more than once in Williams's paintings. It is a perfect example of how Williams is not offering stories to read but rather messages to decode and then activate—by saturating us with symbols we've so internalized that we don't even see them anymore. Once we do discern COEXIST, we can, on the one hand, make fun of sincere hippies who are really into the concept (hippies being a Williams subject as early as 2007, in a painting in which a long-haired fellow gazes at his obsolescent reflection in a CD) and, on the other, kind of wish we *were* sincere hippies, acknowledging the difficulty of maintaining even a bumper sticker's worth of hope. Not surprisingly, a favorite reference of the artist is Martin Kippenberger's 1984 painting *With the Best Will in the World, I Can't See a Swastika*. In that sense, Williams's symbols are the ultimate generative filters—they put us through a valuable thought process that we barely notice.

Whether drawing on the page or the screen, Williams maintains his self-aware, dryly humorous, and, yes, romantic touch. When we speak of an artist's touch—the way she handles paint, let's say—we can also speak of the confidence to *have* a touch at a moment when painting expressively can seem absurdly sincere if there's not a wink involved. But there is also confidence in putting this kind of image, in this mode, out into the world. "Painting is so austere, as a premise, that it can take a lot of dumbness," Williams says, "and still maintain that austerity. It can transform the dumbness into something else." The 2016 painting *Abdicable Frithsokens*, for example, just places the phrase BEST BEACH FOR KIDS IN LA, in a default typeface around a circle. It couldn't be

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Left: **Michael Williams, *Brown Shape*, 2016,** oil and pencil on canvas, 114 × 77".

Right: **Michael Williams, *Purple Shebdy*, 2015,** oil, airbrush, and ink-jet print on canvas, 108 × 85".

more stark, or somehow funnier. Williams sees it as a self-provocation. “I always think about it like in high school—posters that I would put on my wall. . . . There was a Led Zeppelin poster that we found that has been driven over a thousand times . . . a poster of a politician who looked really nerdy. It’s like having something in my house that challenges me every day—I want to live with things that disturb my house a little.”

A central motif for Williams’s Carnegie exhibition depicts a closely observed corner of a classroom, with a couple of chairs, a desk, and then, as if teleported in, a distorted face with a cursor arrow in its eye and a lacrosse player in midstride above it. The right wall of the room is adorned with the phrase GLOBAL WARMING, and its back wall is a wonky grid that in other paintings has variously signaled a highway, a fence, or circuitry. In short, this is a virtual room laden with the symbols and signifiers by which we assemble our teenage selves. Or, as Williams sees it, “a figure daydreaming about lacrosse during a lecture on global warming.” And so, like the hillside, this picture has the feel of lived experience, a memory of school not so removed from Williams’s own (he played lacrosse) but a memory that doesn’t escape its filters unscathed. Five variations on this composition are at the Carnegie, including two much smaller, entirely oil canvases. In *Brown Shape*, 2016, the various elements are fairly clear, even as they interlock to resemble jigsaw-puzzle pieces. Working again in delicate pools of thin oil, Williams evokes San Francisco psychedelia for his global warming, ironically but lovingly nodding to a sincere style contemporaneous with the birth of the environmental movement, pulling the monstrous face into the foreground with a glaring green that calls to mind an earlier ink-jet painting of Shrek (*Jenny’s Path*, 2014), but then giving the painting over to the center, where a lacrosse player emerges from a mottled brown area, his pocket overflowing with dabbed-on brick-red paint, mirrored on the bottom of the stick by what looks like the tip of a paintbrush.

The striking contrast in paint textures and forms gives this scene an immediate emotional heft. Two figures, unsettling in their distortion and both stand-ins for the artist, seem to struggle, in a way not dissimilar to some of Lassnig’s scenarios. By contrast, *Purple Shebdy*, 2015, takes the same image and allows the back-wall puzzle to run amok. Williams’s filter takes over the entire space, distorting everything around it. The lacrosse stick splays in the center, and the room is a riot of deep purple, earthen brown, and varying shades of green.

The chaos of the painting highlights Williams’s talents as a colorist and composer. As in so many of his paintings, colors sit next to each other but do not mix. Perceptually, it’s the equivalent of being tumbled by a wave: You know there is an up and a down, but they are impossible to locate. From work to work, Williams uses repetition and accumulation of images, motifs, and structures, running them through different processes or takes—filters, so to speak—as if echoing the ways in which the world today is like one long repetition of many of the same images and motifs and structures, filtered through different media and membranes, whether screens or surfaces or our eyes. These paintings seem to ask: How do we make sense of a memory that allows for so many versions?

One answer might be found in *Permanent Green*, 2017, a huge and lushly rendered puzzle painting in greens, purples, caked beiges, and muddy browns, replete with black lines and excursions. A face emerges at center right, squeezed into an enormous frown; at left, finely delineated graphic motifs are rudely interrupted by brushy explosions of color. There is no blending, of course—the colors just have to, well,

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coexist. At bottom left is, oddly, a small swirl. At top right, it looks as though another, more conventional abstract painting is bubbling to the surface. Aside from the puzzle pieces, Williams offers no paths to follow here. We are out of the land of referents and in a space where paint is applied in strokes that are variously thin and thick, and seem in some passages angry, in others careful. At its bottom, the painting drips into an indefinite ending.

Permanent Green specifically works against the classrooms (though one might wonder if the matrix that engulfed *Purple Shebdy* expanded, filled in, and overtook the world, sci-fi style) and moves explicitly away from the recognizable and the narrative. It feels as though Williams is summoning up a mystical response to his own prescribed filters, calling forth that knowing romanticism that pervades his funniest and darkest paintings. In the process, he captures the virtual, mnemonic, and informational grid overlaying and underlying our entire experience. □

"Michael Williams" is on view at the Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, April 21 through August 27; a concurrent exhibition, also titled "Michael Williams," is on view at Gladstone Gallery, New York, through May 6.

DAN NADEL IS A CURATOR BASED IN NEW YORK. HE IS EDITING A BOOK OF PETER SAUL'S CORRESPONDENCE. (SEE CONTRIBUTORS.)

Visit our archive at artforum.com/inprint to read a review of Michael Williams's work by Nick Stillman (January 2010).

Michael Williams, ***Permanent Green***, **2017**, oil and enamel on canvas, 9' 2" × 12' 7".