

# Art in America

INTERNATIONAL REVIEW

September 7, 2011

## Tree of Life: Q+A With Lorna Williams

by carly gaebe

Twenty-five-year-old Lorna Williams's debut New York solo show of new work, "brown baby," is autobiographical in extreme and mythologizing ways. A voyage through idiosyncratic sculptures, the depictions begin in utero, with C(ross)-Section, L. Williams, 1986, a cross-section of a tree hung as a relief, mounted with a collage of torn orange papers. An upside-down fetus is nestled in the wood. Another relief, crowning, depicts Williams's birth with a ring of curly brown hairs and the top of an infant's head covered in thorns pushing through the wood. For Williams, the thorns are her protection as she begins the struggle of launching an art career.

The foundations of Williams's pieces are tree parts—from long, curving and sinewy branches that protrude into space to thick cross-sections of trunk hung on the wall. Walking through "brown baby" is like walking through a dark fairytale forest, complete with the aroma of wet soil. At first, Williams's pieces seem passive, like decorated fallen trees. On a closer look, the organic material seems to be preying on space and itself: mangled branches twist over each other; bark swings wildly from the wall.



Amidst twisted branches woven with snakeskin and beads, A.i.A. walked through the exhibition at DODGE Gallery in New York [open through Oct. 2] with Williams to discuss the influence of her hometown of New Orleans, how she produces her intricate works and the histories embedded in her chosen materials.

**CARLY GAEBE** Do your pieces begin conceptually or do materials offer up ideas as you begin to use them?

**LORNA WILLIAMS** It happens both ways—my work is definitely concept-driven but the materials build up and flesh out my ideas. I begin by thinking about what my materials are: their history, functionalities, associations and references. From there I play, exploring various approaches of placement and visual timing of those materials, choosing the arrangement that best supports and presents my concepts. All my pieces begin with questions and I don't think my pieces are necessarily answers. They exist in the place of the questions.

**GAEBE** Where do you find materials?

**WILLIAMS** They just come to me. I drive past things and pick them up. I find things, and I collect things in my studio and I don't touch them. I may put something next to it or make a plan. I always leave a window open, a door open to allow for shift and change.

**GAEBE** How do you use assemblage in your work?

**WILLIAMS** Arranging materials that give space for the concepts to take form and present themselves, and I enjoy discovering the ways something can be manipulated, taken apart and put back together. I am always looking for the double/triple meanings and functions of the words that are used to describe the materials or label them, which guides my decision-making process.

For example, *trap(ped)* started as a visual study of the vagina. I found a slab of cypress swamp wood that resembled the lower torso, hips and thighs, and there was a curvy slit in the panel that reminded me of a vagina. From there I pull together materials that in color, texture, shape and function resemble the vagina/uterus and I put them together in ways that speak to the organs' operation.

**GAEBE** Do you view your sculptures and paintings as extensions of yourself, or as distinct entities with a personality or will?

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**WILLIAMS** I would definitely say that my sculptures and paintings are extensions of myself. I recognize that my work, once given a space to exist and operate, takes on a life of its own. When the viewer spends time with my work, investigating and building conclusions, it enters into another realm.

**GAEBE** From Adrian Piper to Lorna Simpson, female African-American artists have used their bodies and their race to make pointed remarks about culture and the stereotypes it engenders. Do you seek to engage with that recent history?

**WILLIAMS** I am African-American and a part of that culture. Anything I produce will reflect that. My work does not overtly address race, culture and stereotypes in the way that Piper and Simpson do. My work is about my experiences and where I'm from and the culture I was raised in. My experience with race is different, so my work reflects that. Early on, I developed a fascination with the body and specifically black bodies and women's bodies. Now, I am learning about the connecting points in this human web, the in-between spaces, the layers, the folds, the definitions and functions of anatomy, our shared foundation—learning how "woman" and "black" are both just manifestations of the anatomical human body. I like to think that my voice has a slightly different hue and tone and texture to it—I want to hold on to that and protect it as much as I can.

**GAEBE** *birth-right* was the first work I saw of yours in "Dramatis Personae," the 2010 group show at DODGE, and it is now a part of "brown baby." The piece is suspended from the ceiling, trails to the ground and is life-size. It seemed to be an abstract sculpture, but the more I walked around it, the more detail I was able to decipher, and more it looked like a person, a woman, a pregnant woman. What type of balance of figuration and abstraction do you seek?

**WILLIAMS** Toni Morrison leaves spaces for the reader's creativity; I do the same. It is my hope that viewers will spend time investigating, asking questions, making connections, relating to and dancing around my work. The figurative locates the viewer in time and space and there is no concrete space for the viewer to rest in abstraction—I find and present the space between figuration and abstraction for the viewer and allow them to travel within it.

**GAEBE** In terms of either technique or conceptual realization, which piece in "brown baby" was the most difficult to create?

**WILLIAMS** foresight was the most difficult to create. It required arduous visualization. I came to a conclusion, but I am not finished. I am trying to enter into this other, male, body. There is so much more I have to figure out. The male body is a mystery to me. Getting the piece to stand up and be sturdy, putting heavy metals and materials together was difficult. Trying to work out the relationship of the material and what it represents, the gallbladder, the penis, the sperm. I used typewriter balls, which made me think of DNA in sperm, and how coding is engrained in it. The sink strainers are a representation of how some sperm makes it through, and most don't.

**GAEBE** *Untitled*, which is a wall-hung cross-section of wood covered in layers of swirling colorful papers, is based on Hurricane Katrina. You were in New Orleans during the hurricane. How does this piece reflect your experience with that storm?

**WILLIAMS** The relationship materialized in the work's paper collage and Cyprus swamp wood section. The colors are based on radar that you see on weather maps. That experience—I lost my home, thus losing my very foundation, the tangible aspect of home—forced me to grow up. As I began to process and heal, and build my life back up, I recognized how the hurricane affected me. There were some positive attributes too—it pushed me to become more attuned to nature. It was the first piece I did that was not on a rectangular manufactured square panel. I took a raw piece of wood and carved into it. This piece was my beginning in getting into sculpture. At first, I wasn't very comfortable with selling work that was about the hurricane and my experience; it felt exploitative. I didn't want to be a Katrina Survivor Artist. But now that I am healed of it, I recognize that everyone can relate to this—we have hurricanes, family members die, there are so many traumas. New York was affected by a hurricane. There is space for people to relate to it.

**GAEBE** Tell me more about your relationship with your hometown, New Orleans. What rituals or characteristics of the city do you depend on most?

**WILLIAMS** Growing up in New Orleans, I experienced music and dance as forms of expression that allow us to be most in our bodies, to have and own our bodies. I defined this as real freedom. I am New Orleans... I embody its culture and spirit. I look in the mirror, I dance, or I make food. It comes out when I hear my voice, I hear home. I carry this with me always and it comes through everything I do. I come from a street art place—in New Orleans, everyone is an artist. We know how to take shit and make gold. That's something I hold very close to me.