

LORNA WILLIAMS' CHOREOGRAPHED MATERIALITY

By Rich Blint

In a recent interview about her art and process, New Orleans-born artist, Lorna Williams, responded to a query about the “fearlessness” of her practice with rare insight, authority, and sincerity:

[I] am constantly creating what you want to see, making allowances for a dialogue... I guess what I am trying to say is, surrender. Give yourself in, but with consciousness... I have moments of fearfulness, and I take it and use it, examine it... Everything that has happened to me was and is ultimately relevant... I enter into that space when I work, allow it for my work. When I play and dance in my studio, I'm fearless in that space. (FLATT magazine, 2012)

In our contemporary art world of hyper-professionalization and the penchant for the brand that is the predictable consequence of the much-celebrated marriage of art and the marketplace consummated in the closing decades of the last century, few artists manage such fearlessness, to say nothing of a certain virtuoso sincerity in their work and rhetorical practice. Too often distracted by the hide-bound protocols of a regime of graduate instruction seduced by theoretical abstraction, an aversion to the “real,” the illusion of celebrity, and the conferment of manufactured value, many artists find themselves divested of that finely-harnessed intensity of expression that initially compelled a generally hard-won artistic journey. In such freighted terrain, work can only register as “sincere” when guided by a focused artistic interiority or governing imaginative sensibility. It is an inside thing and everything turns on the deft wrenching into being of art objects that achieve transcendence over external factors.

The “artist’s struggle for integrity,” as James Baldwin termed it, is challenging, indeed—the difficulty of which is only exaggerated among African-American artists whose presence in one of the more lucrative and fiercely guarded precincts of the culture has always been complex and noisy. From Alain Locke’s heralding of the New Negro artist, Langston Hughes’s exercised mid-century lament about black artistic identity and that insistent racial mountain, the necessary urgency of the black arts movement of the 1960s, to the culture wars of the 1990s and the more recent proposition of a post-black aesthetics, black artists have had to negotiate a disorienting number of cues and expectations concerning how and what they represent.

The work of Lorna Williams, now spanning almost a decade, is at once familiar and refreshing in this context, particularly given the artist’s avowed ambition to confront the human (and, in particular, the body) as a means to examine her rootedness in time and space. Working with a dazzling array of objects found, organic, and fabricated, Williams also deploys sound, video, and an impressive knowledge of plumbing, wood-working, and metallurgy in a choreography of materiality that achieves as much in tangible object-making as it does in vulnerability and existential or ontological reflection. These “structures of feeling” are undoubtedly a result of her consistent declaration of the body as a productive site for the excavation of meaning, as well as her evolving philosophy that historical specificity has much to teach us about human interaction:

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. (Art in America, September 2011)

Referencing the conventions of a literary master, Williams is pointed about the relationship between the figurative and the abstract in American culture and addresses the role of the viewer in the artistic exchange. For her, the categories of “woman” and “black” are concrete abstractions (simultaneously real and mythic) and she is concerned with exploring the corporeal cut, the fracture, or the fissure in/on the (social) body, which courts a process of discovery with the viewer in which value or meaning exists within the “folds” and those “in-between” spaces:

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. (Art in America, September 2011; emphasis added)

Originally exhibited as part of the Studio Museum of Harlem's *Bearden Project*, Williams', *ro-mer-ee's plumage*, (2012) is a stunning example of the artist's material and conceptual dexterity. Fashioned from x-acto blades, rooster feet, chain, paper, pen parts, wire, a headphone adapter among other finely collaged aspects, *ro-mer-ee's plumage* is at once an homage to Bearden's love for roosters and collage mastery as it is a nod to a tradition of "outsider art" that flouts received convention. Likewise, *things fall apart* (2013), a moving re-presentation of the sacred birthing of Taiyewo and Kehinde, the name given twins in the Yoruba tradition of Nigeria, made from wood, pen parts, thorns, and knives, further corroborates Williams' concern with routes and rootedness in her engagement with African cosmology, while giving a literary nod to the late Nigerian author, Chinua Achebe. Her corresponding video collaboration with filmmaker, tiona m., a cinematic re-inflection of the Ibeji twin narrative, written and directed by the filmmaker, and featuring the artist as she retrieves source material in a citified wilderness, is a convergence of autobiography and New World storytelling.

Williams is gracefully walking a delicate line between the folksy and the conceptual, and *threefold* (2013), in its fulsome articulation, confirms that Williams has her feet firmly planted. An arresting triptych of skeletal forms made from plumbing hardware, glass bottles, bike cogs, turtle shell, violin parts, as well as a brilliantly wrought and restrained riot of other hardware and organic material dramatically suspended from small weathered doors, this piece represents the body and the human as both mortal and machine: a 21st century cyborg born of personal narrative—figures concrete, deeply vulnerable, but transcendent. Importantly, *threefold* represents Williams' most sustained artistic engagement with male figures as she contemplates the bodily significance of male members of her family navigating physical illnesses. The specificity of these gendered figures is important inasmuch as they represent Williams' continued interest in supplanting categories of gender assignment and an investment in the democratizing ground of being.

Williams' more recent work represents an immersion and deepening of this concern and displays what by now we can reference as characteristic "fearlessness." One example is her most recently completed work *Ouroboros* (2013). An anatomized contortion of hair, plumbing hardware, violin parts, photography lenses, snake vertebrae, a bike wheel, a ukulele neck, plaster teeth, speaker, snake shedding, root, and other materials interconnected and mounted to a wall with a system of pulleys that at once bind and balance the co-dependent forms. The piece dramatizes our conception of the human as Williams' depicts the figure in the act of self-consumption, while addressing the cyclical and inherently balanced nature of existence.

This is virtuoso sincerity at its best, devoid of artistic platitudes and clichés. Through her original and persistently challenging objects, Williams is extending an invitation for personal discovery via her mystifying rumination on the corporeal.

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