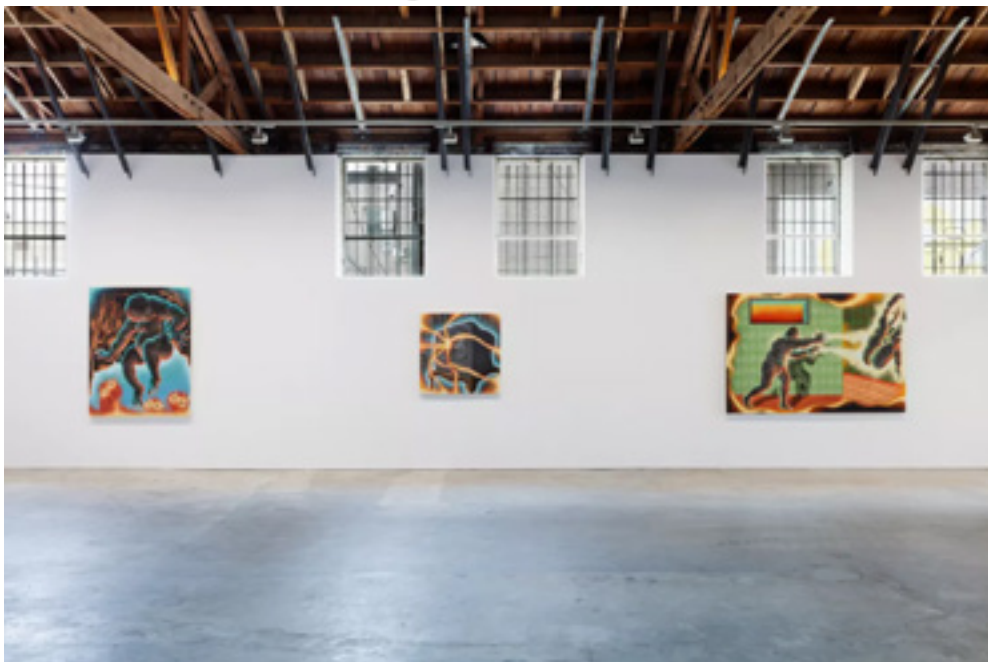




# DIDIER WILLIAM



# Los Angeles Times



An installation view of Didier William's show at James Fuentes. At right is a canvas inspired by his mother, "I Wanted Her to Kill Him, I Know Why She Didn't," 2023. (Evan Bedford / James Fuentes)

## HAITI-BORN DIDIER WILLIAM'S DAZZLING, GAZING PAINTINGS ARE LITERALLY AN EYEFUL

By Carolina A. Miranda

It is a source of the divine and of evil. It is vulnerable and powerful. It is a filter of light as well as its ultimate source. The eye, wrote 20th century Spanish poet Juan Eduardo Cirlot (citing the ancient Greeks), "would not be able to see the sun if, in a manner, it were not itself a sun." The eye illuminates; to see is "a spiritual act and symbolizes understanding."

The eye — with its many meanings — makes repeated appearances in the fantastical (and fantastic) paintings of Didier William, currently the subject of a one-man show, "Didier William: Things Like This Don't Happen Here," at James Fuentes gallery in Hollywood. Amid otherworldly landscapes that seem to buzz with sentience and pulse with electricity, William places mysterious, faceless figures whose skins consist of hundreds, if not thousands, of eyes.

The eyes are a way for Black bodies to reflect the intense scrutiny so often thrust upon them. "It's a way for the figures in my paintings to return the curious gaze," William told me in a telephone interview in 2018. "Not just with their eyes, but with every square inch of their skin."

The eyes have other purposes too. "They are like apotropaic amulets warding off the evil eye: an army of ever-watchful, unblinking, cyclopean eyes," wrote critic Zoé Samudzi in a short monograph of William's work published in 2021. "They are the materialization of an autonomous and collectivized claiming of the right to look."

There is a lot going on in the work of William, a Haiti-born, Miami-raised artist now based in Philadelphia. His work first grabbed my attention in the group show "Relational Undercurrents: Contemporary Art of the Caribbean Archipelago" in 2018 at the Museum of Latin American Art in Long Beach. That exhibit featured his 2015 canvas "They play too much, till we stop playin'," in which one of his eye-covered figures wrestles shadowy appendages on a wooden stage. Was it a body wrestling

unseen forces? Or struggling against itself? It's hard to say, but the tussle was engrossing.

Since then, I have stumbled upon his work in group settings on a handful of occasions, most recently in "Forecast Form: Art in the Caribbean Diaspora, 1990s-Today" which was presented at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago earlier this year (and will travel to the Institute of Contemporary Art Boston in the fall).

Each time I've run into William's paintings, I've been floored — not only by the ways he uses imagery but also by the careful crafting of his pieces. The exhibition at James Fuentes, which inaugurated the New York-based gallerist's L.A. space early last month and is now in its final days, provides an opportunity to soak up a number of his works in a single setting on the West Coast.

The solo show gathers 14 new paintings that delve into the otherworldly as well as the biographical.

A large vertical canvas titled "Plonje (Dive)," made this year, shows three faceless figures plunging into a watery deep. It evokes the ways in which the seas around Haiti have served as a graveyard to Africans and their descendants, beginning with the Middle Passage and continuing through the perilous journeys Haitians still make to Florida today. But these supernatural eye-covered bodies slip through a body of water that also has eyes. The scene evokes death, but there is life as well. The mystical nature of the figures reminds me of Drexciya, the mythical world devised by the Detroit musical group of the same name — an underwater universe peopled by the superhuman descendants of enslaved women whose bodies were thrown from slave ships.

Another canvas, "I Wanted Her to Kill Him, I Know Why She Didn't," also from 2023, is more personal. It was inspired by the artist's mother, a restaurant worker who contended with an abusive boss. It shows a figure blasting another with rays of light inside an abstracted room. The walls are covered in a repeating pattern of vèvè symbols, the ritual designs employed in Haitian Vodou. In this case, a heart pattern evoking Erzulie Dantor, a protective maternal spirit.

An installation view of Didier William's show at James

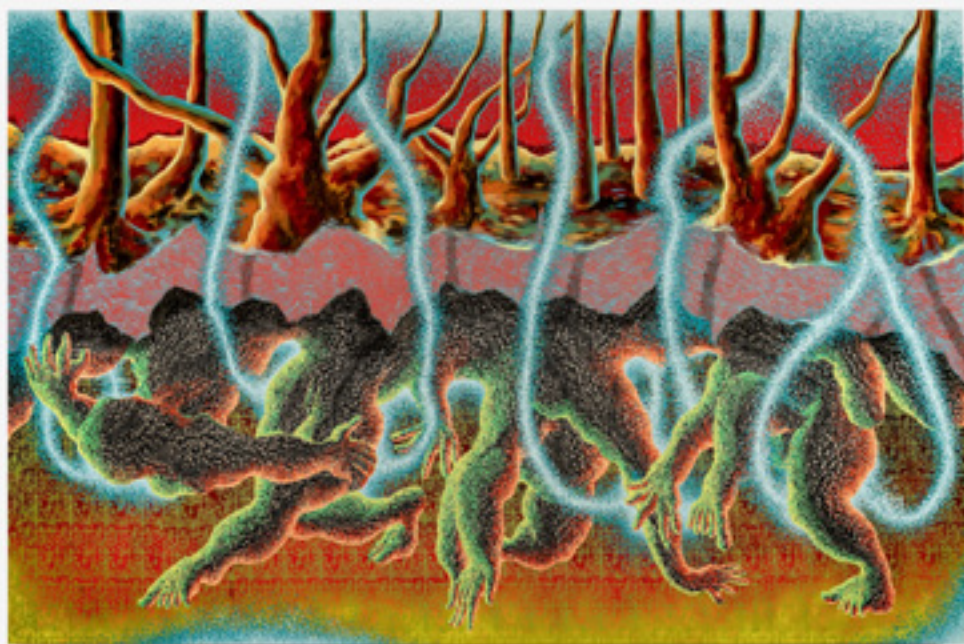
Fuentes. At right is a canvas inspired by his mother, "I Wanted Her to Kill Him, I Know Why She Didn't," 2023. (Evan Bedford / James Fuentes)

From a distance, the paintings swirl and seethe with motion and bright splashes of color. Particularly memorable is a large horizontal piece that was inspired by an episode from William's childhood, when he was hit by a car after chasing his dog into a busy street. "My Father's Nightmares: 40mph Hit" shows a stand-in for the artist catapulted into the air by the force of the impact; in the distance, his father waves his arms helplessly. Binding the scene together is a thread of blue-white light that connects the two figures but that also seems to track William's motions through time and space. Is it possible for a car accident to be hauntingly beautiful? This one is.

Most remarkable, however, is the detail you'll find when you move in close. William produces his paintings on wood panel, and he frequently carves the eye patterns into the wood itself, albeit very lightly. This gives his eyes texture, but not in a way that greatly interrupts the surface of the picture. It deepens a sense of illusion: His figures are of the painting but not entirely of the painting — inhabiting a nether material state.

William likes to say that he "antagonizes paintings with other mediums." I'd venture to say that "conjuring" might be a better word, since these are works that feel as if they've been touched by a little bit of magic.

# i-D



“Cursed Grounds: They’ll Come for Us. They’ll Come from the Sky,” 2022

## A PAINTER REIMAGINES HIS HAITIAN CHILDHOOD THROUGH MAGICAL REALISM

The artist Didier William carves out memories from his youth growing up in an immigrant household – albeit not exactly as they happened.

By Margarita Lila Rosa

Didier William’s newest series of wood-panel works is told from the perspective of his childhood self, with all the wonder, curiosity and magic that comes with being a kid. Some of the works speak to the experiences of his parents, as they raised young Didier in Miami, Florida. While, for some, Miami can feel like a sort of second Haiti, for Didier and his family, being in the United States brought instability and a constant sense of othering.

Recently, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Miami (MOCA) presented a survey of Didier’s earlier works — the artist’s largest solo presentation yet. Now, just a few months later, he is presenting a solo exhibition of new works at the James Fuentes Gallery space in Los Angeles, titled *Things Like This Don’t Happen Here* — the ‘here’ a reference to Miami. “This new world was weird and spectacular and strange, partly because we weren’t from here,” Didier said. “Because we didn’t have the benefit of ground underneath us, the stakes felt that much higher.”

We sat down with Didier to talk about the show, the childhood memories that inspired the work and the ancestral connections he hopes to tap into on his journey of experiencing the world as a new parent.

### How does it feel to have a solo at a gallery space again, after your career-defining show at MOCA?

It feels phenomenal to be here. This is the most personal work that I’ve made in a long time, and it’s also the most mythological work that I’ve made in a long time. The MOCA show was an encapsulated survey of my earlier career. It feels really great to come out of that show with a new direction and introduce that new direction in a whole new space. It all feels pretty euphoric, honestly.





“My Father’s Nightmares: My Sleepwalkers Crucible,” 2023

**You have so many caves and subterranean elements in this show. How do these elements play in how you think about memories and space?**

Space often provides groundedness and stability. When thinking about how these moments live in my memory, I wanted to strip any stable ground away from them, because that’s how we lived these events. That’s how we experienced them: with the kind of urgency that didn’t give us the security of being from the area or being native-born citizens — an urgency that quite literally stripped the ground from underneath us. So, I like to think: how can I make images in the absence of gravity? What are the spatial conditions where we can suspend gravity? For me, that happens underwater and in air. So, in my work, you’ll see people suspended and in air, or underwater. They’re intentionally upended.

**I love the piece in the show “Cursed Grounds” because it represents a compositional style you work with a lot, which is dividing the space between a subterranean world and the world above ground.**

This goes back to the idea of multiple histories happening simultaneously. My partner and I are new parents, and this landscape was inspired by Lorimer Park, where we would take our daughter during COVID. When we went there, we would marvel at these beautiful, huge trees spread across the park. As I was coming back to this part of my practise about subterranean life, I wanted to think about these energetic waves as the connective tissue between us, the heavens and the ancestors. These energetic waves stitch and seam the terrestrial and ancestral worlds together. a surreal painting of a forest

**You seem to strip away gender presentations. Have your figures always been this amorphous and anonymous?**

Yes, I intentionally strip them of any kind of gender formations. As a queer person, I want to think about how gender shows up in the work beyond sexuality, beyond body-to-body coupling. I want to think about how gender shows up in the family or how gender — or the absence thereof — can manipulate a space. There is a

kind of multiplicity that undergirds everything about queerness that, for me, has to go well beyond the body. In the beginning, I wanted to cloak my figures in this armour of eyes. Actually, in the newer works that I am working on right now in the studio, they are beginning to shed this skin, and are beginning to “talk back” to the eyes. But rather than these figures being amorphous, I want to see them as intentionally cloaked in this shield of armour. The cloak is “anonymity” to the extent that it can be radical liberation. If you immigrate to this country speaking a language other than English, for example, you have this sort of superpower. Just as others can render you invisible, you can render yourself invisible and move through spaces with a kind of subversive energy.

**There is so much power in your work, “I Wanted Her to Kill Him, I Know Why She Didn’t”? Can you tell me about the memories that brought about this piece?**

When I was around eleven, my mom used to work at this Haitian restaurant in Miami and her boss was terribly abusive. There were times that he tried to sexually assault my mom. One time, my father and I went to pick her up late at night and she got into the car crying. She started telling my father how nasty this man was, and I remember being in the back seat thinking: my dad is this big strong man, and my mom is the strongest person I know. How can they let this happen to her? Why doesn’t my mother just eradicate him? Why doesn’t my father just kill this man? Why don’t they just get rid of him? My eleven-year-old brain tried to find the simplest solution. And I wanted to go back to that moment and think about, if I could have actualised it then, what would it have looked like?

**Would you describe your work as surrealist?**

I describe it as magical realist. The mystical realm is part of our ancestry, especially within Haitian Vodou and worship rituals. I can’t separate Vodou from how we identify as Haitians and how I — coming from the diaspora — conceptualise it, having left Haiti when I was six years old. As I am grappling with my own personal anecdotal history and those histories that have been passed

down orally, you can’t not include mysticism, mythology, Vodou and magical realism. That language has to be part of how I tell the immigrant story. The oral archive, for me, is just as important as the supposedly “stable” historical archive. The oral archive is organic, it is living and it is contained in the bodies of me, my siblings and our ancestors. That archive is just as important to me. I want to think about, when lightning comes from the sky, how does that remap an event as it lives in my memory? Now, that’s a different kind of realism.

# CULTURED

**ARTIST DIDIER WILLIAM WANTS SURPRISE, NOT CLOSURE, FROM THE CANVAS**

**The painter is set to inaugurate the new Los Angeles location of James Fuentes gallery with his show “Things Like This Don’t Happen Here.”**

By Devan Díaz



Didier William, “Things Like This Don’t Happen Here” (Exhibition View), 2023.  
All images courtesy of the artist and James Fuentes.

“Catharsis isn’t a debt that my work owes me,” says the artist Didier William. He’s referring to the 14 paintings that make up his next show, “Things Like This Don’t Happen Here,” set to inaugurate the Los Angeles outpost of New York’s James Fuentes gallery. Here, we see an ensemble of mythological characters cast by William to portray scenes from personal and familial histories, with all the gaps and mysteries inherent to recollection. Looking back, he’s seeking to be surprised, or reminded, of forgotten details. “That is the fairest role of the artwork,” he says. “To expect it to heal me is unfair.”

The title came to William after his exhibition at the Museum Of Contemporary Art North Miami, the largest survey of the artist’s work thus far. The museum is 10 minutes from William’s parents’ home and two doors up from the dollar store that employed him in high school. Coming out of the MOCA North Miami show, all the stories that came rushing back to William were personal anecdotes from growing up in a new country. He says of those early years: “We packed up, left Haiti, and left behind our friends and family. Our anchors were these critical moments where real decisions had to be made.” Things like this don’t happen here is a rhetorical device we use to explain the inexplicable; a stroke of luck or tragedy. A phrase that places you on the outside of an experience.

And then there is the work: paint and collage layered on top of wood carvings on panels like a musical score, mapping out a rhythm. The characters are not quite human, and often weightless: free from gravity, nation, and flesh. In the painting *Plonje (Dive)*, 2023, we see three titans in a subterranean environment, as if a camera has turned down from above to watch these figures in their graceful contortions.



The lightness of this painting crashes against *My Father's Nightmares: 40mph*, 2023, a memory of a car colliding with a twelve-year-old William as his father helplessly looks on. "I haven't talked to my dad about that painting," William says, "but I guarantee it would deviate in part [from his memory]. The painting presents a tertiary example, not one that I, my father, or the pain of that experience owns." The work becomes its own experience separate from the event, one that viewers can take ownership of.

Didier William, *Dezabiye: a Supple Burning Glare*, 2023.

During the last decade, bodies began to appear in William's work. "I never wanted to paint a conventional, naturalistic body," he says. "It felt too reductive and overly simplistic." The resulting figures were coated in hundreds of eyes, watching us watch them. The eyes speak to the Black diasporic experience and the armor needed for protection from constant surveillance. But now, with this show, we are beginning to see what's underneath them. In *Dezabiye: a Supple Burning Glare*, 2023, two distinct glowing eyes and a hint of a mouth burst upwards at God, or their reflection, for the first time. "The cloak they've held is starting to break open," says William, "and they can speak with [their mouths] and realize they're an element of themselves, but not their totality."



Didier William, *Dezabiye: a Supple Burning Glare*, 2023.



# FT FINANCIAL TIMES



Didier William's 'Nou Poko Fini' (2019) © Domus Collection

## DIDIER WILLIAM: ARTIST WHO GOUGES DEEP INTO HIS HERITAGE

With his work on show in North Miami, the Haitian-American talks about his sculptural approach to painting and printmaking  
Caroline Roux

In February this year, the artist Didier William was presented with the keys to the city of North Miami, Florida, a place he arrived in 34 years ago, aged six. William was born in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, and his heritage rumbles through his large bold paintings where he unravels both autobiographical memories and broader questions of belonging and identity. “Jumping between micro and macro,” says William of his focus. “I’ve never had any qualms about that.”

This significant honour — bestowed by the mayor of North Miami, Alix Desulme, a fellow Haitian-American — could be considered William’s second from the city in just a few months. The first was the opening of his biggest institutional solo show to date in November at the Museum of Contemporary Art North Miami. Just minutes from where William grew up, the museum is showing several series of his visceral, vibrant paintings until the end of April, many of them borrowed from enthusiastic private collectors.

“I wanted the exhibition to offer an experience and a narrative and to show the whole person, in the neighbourhood where he grew up,” says its curator Erica Moiah James, who first met William in 2014. “I’m interested in all the paths Didier goes down.” The first painting that visitors see is of William himself with his husband Justin (a mental health therapist) as two heroic figures lifting aloft their first child, Ava, against a burning red sky. Whether it is evoking the triumph or the isolation of the queer family (which now includes five-month-old Olivier) is open to question: the artist sometimes uses the word “malleable” to describe his work.

William, who studied painting at the prestigious Maryland Institute College of Art and then printmaking at Yale, makes intensely layered and detailed work that pairs the precise crafts of printmaking and carving into wood, with painting in richly hued

acrylics and oils. It mingles the legacies of western art movements, from romanticism to Post-Impressionism, with his own jagged, restless aesthetic. No one and nothing is at rest here. It really packs a punch.

He chose to work on wood, not canvas, when he found that it could be both additive and subtractive. “I could gouge right into the surface,” he says. “Printmaking is three-dimensional and I see the paintings that result from my process as low-relief sculptures, with different layers being forced into tension.”

William’s personal experience and the broader themes of immigrant and queer identity and Haitian history have been carefully teased out by Moiah James from a decade’s work, made first in Brooklyn where William moved after Maryland, then in Philadelphia where he now lives with his family. (He holds a post at Rutgers University an hour away: assistant professor of expanded print.) Two eerie paintings of the first homes his family occupied in Miami are completely new, brought about by William’s return to the city in preparation for the exhibition.

Once the show had been confirmed, his feelings about Miami began to bubble up again,” says Moiah James. William says that he sees the homes as “sacred sites, architectural relics. I wanted to protect the integrity of those spaces because they protected me.” And yet, with a surreal twist, they are shown as floating containers, buoyed up on a confusion of human limbs; homes without foundations.

“As I relived those early experiences, I couldn’t help thinking now how difficult it must have been for my parents. It was a frenetic time,” says William. “But the paintings are not an act of catharsis. When I make them, I have already made peace with the subject. It’s about extension and mythology.”

He moves smoothly between his points of interest: on one wall a depiction of Dantor, a senior spirit in Haitian voodoo cradling her daughter Anais; on another the battered Toyota in which William — who says he initially negotiated his sexuality by watching episodes of TV comedy series *The Golden Girls* — first made out. “I really wanted to absorb all things American and discovered that TV show. It offered an incredible lesson on gender







and gender performance in the bodies of four women trying to reimagine their lives outside of being wives and mothers. I didn't have the language for queerness, but this was a lesson in it."

A steaming tureen of soup *joumou* reminds us of the liberation of Haiti in 1803 from the French. The dish of winter squash and beef — once made by slaves for the exclusive delight of their colonisers — is eaten on New Year's Day. (William's mother became a cook when she arrived in the US; she now runs her own restaurant in Fort Lauderdale.) Elsewhere, the drama of Jacques-Louis David's "The Death of Marat" is replayed, the main character recast by William as a woman, brandishing a machete and — furiously emerging from the famous bath — very far from dead. "I'm interested in the parallels of the French Revolution and the Haitian revolution," he says.

William has never been back to Haiti. "The reality of immigration is the imaginary place, the porous relationship to borders," he says, and the exhibition at MOCA is called *Nou Kite Tout Sa Dèyè*, a phrase repeated by his mother throughout his childhood, meaning "we've left it all behind." But not completely. The exhibition title and all the captions in the show are in Kreyol first; the Haitian language becomes an entity and thus an exhibit in itself. "I wanted to invert the relationship that traditionally makes us, the immigrants, work harder," says William, who was the first in his family to learn English, becoming aged seven its *de facto* spokesperson. "Translation is labour. On the opening night, I got a lot of thanks for it."

Ten years ago, William started to work with a new motif, covering the skin of his figurative subjects with a mass of deeply gouged eyes. It was his personal reaction to the killing of Trayvon Martin in 2012. "It is a skin that can see, that builds a circuit of looking," he says. The multiple stare is everywhere — both unsettling and with a contemplative power in its outward gaze, a reversal of the annihilating gaze bestowed so often on the immigrant. It makes the viewer look back and look closely. Indeed, if part of William's mission is to make us look and think, it is mission accomplished.

# FRIEZE

**THE BEST SHOWS TO SEE DURING MIAMI ART WEEK**  
From T. Elliott Mansa's take on the iconic 1970s sunken living room to Didier William's largest exhibition to date at MOCA North Miami, here are the best shows to see during Miami Art Week  
By Monica Uszerowicz



Didier William, *Just Us Three*, 2021, acrylic, oil, wood carving on panel, 2.6 × 1.7

During Art Week it can be tough to make the journey between the beach and downtown Miami, the traffic and the city's weakening infrastructure stretching a distance typically traversed in about fifteen minutes. But you'd be remiss not to travel a bit further north to Didier William's largest exhibition to date. Both the title and setting are aptly retrospective, the former translating to 'We've left that all behind' in Haitian Creole. The artist himself was raised in North Miami. Curated by Erica Moiah James, the exhibition features new paintings among the more than forty mixed media pieces, some of which refer with great sensitivity to William's personal experiences in the last few years. William and his husband became parents during the early days of the COVID-19 lockdown; in *Just Us Three* (2021), the figures gaze over a precipice and hold each other, covered in the artist's signature pattern of eyes, as if they were looking at us, too. MOCA has also partnered with producer and director Marlon Johnson to produce a documentary on William, which is forthcoming. Before leaving MOCA, see Chire Regans a.k.a. VantaBlack's 'To What Lengths', for which the artist has decorated the museum plaza's palm trees with braids, beads and flowers.



# The New York Times



“Gwo Madame” (2020) by Dider William is in his retrospective at MOCA North

## ART TO SEE IN SOUTH FLORIDA THIS WINTER

Visitors will find a rich variety of works at museums, satellite fairs and art spaces.

by Laurel Graeber

Alongside Art Basel, now celebrating its 20th anniversary in Miami Beach, the South Florida network of museums, private collections, art spaces and satellite fairs has proliferated and matured in tandem. These institutions always serve up their shiniest offerings for the annual movable feast, and high-speed train service on the Brightline now makes it all the easier to sample shows as far north as West Palm Beach. Here’s a selection from the buffet.

### MOCA NORTH MIAMI

Embedded in a largely immigrant community and a longtime anchor for contemporary art backed by hefty scholarship, MOCA North Miami now is giving its spotlight to an artist from the museum’s own backyard. Didier William, born in Haiti and raised in North Miami, currently has his largest retrospective to date on view with surreal paintings, prints and sculptures that explore his coming-of-age as a Black, queer immigrant. Mr. William’s dreamy and disorienting landscapes are populated with figures tattooed entirely with eyes, like a protective and watchful bark, a motif that he began exploring after the 2012 killing of Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Fla.

# Art | Basel



Didier William, *Mosaic Pool*, Miami, 2021. Collection of Reginald and Aliya Browne.

## FOR DIDIER WILLIAM, HOME IS WHERE THE ART IS The Haitian American artist returns to Miami for his first museum solo exhibition at MOCA North Miami, painting a watchful gaze on Black queer life

by Claire Breukel

Born in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, Didier William moved to Miami at age six and called North Miami home. His early creativity led him to Downtown Miami's New World School of the Arts before moving to Baltimore to study painting at the Maryland Institute College of Art, and to Connecticut to complete a master's degree at Yale University. William taught in Philadelphia and is now assistant professor at Mason Gross School of the Arts at Rutgers University. This immense résumé is not only a testament to William's talent, but an indication of adaptability and the ability to transcend fixed definitions of belonging and home. It is this same liberation from space that underscores the state of the amorphous figures that fill William's paintings, prints and sculptures, which exist in a present imaginary and as extensions of William's identity. As such, a discourse of Black queer life in America permeated with Floridian influence underpins William's first museum solo exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art, North Miami, currently on view and running through April 16, 2023.

'Didier was able to make it in a system that is entrenched in cruel paradigms of exploitation for many Haitians. He is at the same time a Haitian artist and a contemporary painter,' shares renowned artist Edouard Duval-Carrié. The multi-layers within William's artworks reflect the complexities of his Haitian American upbringing in Miami, a city he describes as 'a Latin American corridor influential in shaping the inherent and maybe even necessary untidiness of representation, especially when talking about the histories of Black and brown people.' Within this untidiness, William found freedom. Inspired by printmaking techniques, abstract silhouettes float timelessly across the surface, elusive yet powerfully personal. 'We don't usually see artists willing to discuss their family struggles, their coming-out story, while delving deeply into broader political realities of Black life and the threat



of the white or state gaze on Black bodies, Black performativity, the stakes of looking, or the increasing inability of the Black body to provide evidence of its destruction,' explains Dr. Erica Moiah James, guest curator of William's exhibition. On closer inspection, William's figures are constructed from multiple cutout eyes staring back to consume the viewer as much as they are being consumed.

'Faceless and yet all-seeing, this repeating eye motif has become highly recognizable to Didier's work, materializing the process of gazing and bearing witness that lies at the heart of his practice – insisting on a "circuit" between the body and its observer,' explains the James Fuentes gallery team. In 2019, William exhibited 'Broken Skies: Vertières,' a wallpaper, etching, and three monumental carved paintings in James Fuentes's Nova booth at Art Basel Miami Beach. Vertières was the last major Haitian Revolution battle in Haiti's independence from France (arguably still in process). William's powerful figures stare back demanding consideration and colonial introspection.

William is firmly established academically and institutionally, so it's timely that 'Didier William: Nou Kite Tout Sa Dèyè (We Leave It All Behind)' opens at the Museum of Contemporary Art, North Miami (MOCA) in tandem with a documentary film spearheaded by the University of Miami, MOCA and Miami filmmaker Marlon Johnson. The exhibition brings together multimedia works between the past five and 10 years yet to be in dialogue at this scale. "Nou Kite Tout Sa Dèyè" features over 40 paintings and prints, works on paper and three new artist books. We are also so proud to have commissioned William's first monumental sculpture,' describes Chana Budgazad Sheldon, executive director of MOCA North Miami.

The exhibition serves as a micro-survey within the context of William's upbringing and personal chronicle. The *Just Us Three* woodcarving suggests a self-portrait of William, his husband, and their daughter, a family gazing over an enigmatic vista. The painting *Mosaic Pool, Miami* is a nostalgic social poolside encounter compiled of eyes unapologetically returning the gaze. 'Situating the work in North Miami at this moment allows viewers the ben-

efit of comparison between my paintings, and the lived realities of Haitians in Miami in real time, and the inherent gap in between,' shares William.

Organizations such as the Little Haiti Cultural Center and Haitian Cultural Arts Alliance were established after William left Miami to study and now provide a cultural hub for Afro Caribbean cultural dialogue. His success serves as an affirmation for the immigrant creative community. 'Miami should claim Didier William not only as a wonderful artist but as an educator. Didier is a real success story,' concludes Duval-Carrié.

So, is Haiti or Miami or Philadelphia home? William may long for these places, but it is too simplistic to deduce home as a place. William closes, 'Since Miami has the largest Haitian community outside of Haiti, it's sort of a Haitian diaspora mecca, so this exhibition could be seen as a homecoming. But my relationship to home is a complicated network of intersecting and overlapping emotions. I sometimes prefer to think of this as a reintroduction rather than a homecoming.' It seems where William and his art is present, is home.

# The New York Times



*Broken Skies: Tè a mi*, 2019, by Didier William translates to “The ground is fertile.”

**IN DIDIER WILLIAM’S ART, THERE IS MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE**

**The Haitian-American artist brings his insight and intricate work to Art Basel Miami Beach in what feels like a homecoming.**  
by Laurel Graeber

It is difficult to escape that sensation when viewing the work of Didier William, a 36-year-old Haitian-American artist who will be exhibiting for the first time at Art Basel Miami Beach. His three enormous paintings destined for the fair, which are part of a larger series he has tentatively titled “Broken Skies: Vertières,” all depict huge, amorphous bodies whose skin is covered with narrow, piercing eyes.

The James Fuentes Gallery in New York will present these pieces in the Nova section against a backdrop that is also dotted with eyes. For Mr. William, this repeating symbol is both a shield from — and a response to — an onlooker’s curious appraisal.

“The eye motif developed around 2014 or 2015 as a way to return some of that gaze back onto the viewer,” he said in an interview in his studio here.

As a gay black immigrant, Mr. William knows what it is like to be stared at. Born in Port-au-Prince, he came as a Creole-speaking 6-year-old to Miami, where he lived with his parents and two older brothers. He spent his youth “closeted,” he said, in a city where “Haitians were relegated to a kind of second-class citizenry.”

At the same time, Miami was also where teachers recognized his talent and steered him toward the New World School of the Arts, a specialized public school that served as a springboard to a degree in painting from the Maryland Institute College of Art and a master of fine arts from Yale. The significance of his debut at Art Basel — where each of his paintings will be priced at \$65,000 — is not lost on him or his dealer, who submitted his work there partly because “of the importance of Miami in shaping his identity and narrative,” said James Fuentes, the gallery owner.

Mr. William’s art, however, is never about just one place or person. “This idea that we don’t exist as singular bodies or singular identities, I think, has always been very much part of my work,” he





Haitian culture and mythology infuse Mr. William's works that will be on display at Art Basel Miami Beach.

said. In these paintings, “the overwhelming amount of eyes serves that.”

The figures are important, too. Mr. William, whose career in academia led him to move to Philadelphia three years ago to become chair of the M.F.A. program at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts — a position he recently left — embraced abstraction for a while. But he returned to more figurative work after the 2012 killing of Trayvon Martin, an unarmed black teenager who was shot to death in Sanford, Fla., by George Zimmerman, a neighborhood watch volunteer who was ultimately acquitted of second-degree murder. In Mr. William's view, those events began with one man's act of looking — and assuming. The bodies Mr. William has introduced into his work are deliberately unidentifiable, neither male nor female nor even always human.

“The viewer,” he said, “is never really let off the hook in terms of becoming specifically aware of how their gaze is gendering or racializing the figures.”

In other ways, however, Mr. William's work teems with specific symbols. His paintings at Art Basel are filled with clouds, a new motif that he sees as both “an extraterrestrial space” and a reference to archives of information. The art features luminous colors and dotted patterns, whose staccato effects evoke “Broken Skies,” a title that alludes to the fractures caused by colonialism. The title's other half, Vertières, is the name of the 1803 battle in which Haiti finally wrested its independence from France, a historical moment that is further reflected in the machete and shovels in the painting “Broken Skies: Nou poko fini,” whose Creole words translate as “We aren't done yet.”

The shovel, in particular, represents the relationship of Mr. William's forebears to their land, “one of the main reasons why Haitians were able to defeat the French in the first place,” he said. “For me it's like this Excalibur.”

Haitian culture and mythology also infuse the other Art Basel works. “Broken Skies: Ouve pot la pou yo” takes its Creole title from the chorus of the song “Tande” (“Listen”) by the Haitian band Boukan Ginen. The phrase means “Open the door for them,” “them” being the loa, or voodoo spirits.

“Broken Skies: Tè a mi,” whose title translates as “The ground is fertile,” is “sort of a painting for my husband,” said Mr. William, who is married to Justin William, a psychotherapist. The two are planning to become parents, and a vibrant, fiery band on the work’s surface is subtly printed with the symbol for the loa’s fierce matriarch.

The art is layered materially, too. Preferring to work on wooden panels rather than stretched canvas, Mr. William carves each unblinking eye directly into the surface, a technique that connects painting with printing. (He is now an assistant professor of expanded print at the Mason Gross School of the Arts at Rutgers, a post whose odd title indicates the extension of the medium.) His works incorporate collage, oil paint and acrylic as well, making them as multifarious as the Afro-Caribbean diaspora itself.

Seeing this complex painting as a text, Mr. William does not expect everyone to read it the same way. “If my mom, an art historian, a master printer and an oil painter were discussing the work, and they came to four different conclusions about it, I would be O.K. with that,” he said. “One of the joys for me is layering as much information into the paintings as possible, and allowing my viewer to excavate any part of that they wish.”

Those who have bought Mr. William’s work include the Carnegie Museum of Art, the Minneapolis Institute of Art, private collectors and a British pop star who did not want his name published — all testimony to what Mr. Fuentes called its “universal appeal.”

It is art with “iconography that everyone can understand,” he said, “even though it has a particular intention and concept.”

For Mr. William, that intention is always to explore the diasporan experience and, he said, “to get closer to a truth that makes sense for black and brown people.” But he takes special pride in bringing this work to Miami in what feels like a homecoming.

“Home is never quite a singular locale,” Mr. William said, “which for me I think is a source of agency rather than a traumatic condition.”



# Art in America



Didier William, *Kolan get manman yo*, 2018, collage, acrylic, ink, and carving on

## DIDIER WILLIAM

by Faye Hirsch

The twenty-one mixed-medium paintings in Didier William's two-venue exhibition—the most ambitious showing of his work to date—were primarily large, more than seven feet long or tall in some cases, and elaborate, suggesting prodigious activity over the past year, when all of them were made. Their titles were in Haitian Creole and left untranslated, as the thirty-six-year-old Port-au-Prince-born American artist wishes to alert viewers to the linguistic challenges faced by his own parents and other diasporic people and to privilege communication with his compatriots. The exhibition as a whole, though, was given an English title, “Curtains, Stages, and Shadows,” announcing the central motifs of the works, most of which portray silhouette-type figures on stages framed by striped components suggesting colorful patterned fabrics.

Rendered on wooden panels, the works combine painted, collaged, and carved elements. The silhouette figures are composed of all-over fields of small eyes incised into the supports and inked in black. Unlike Kara Walker's silhouettes, William's appear to teem with interior life, looking from the inside out, and everywhere. The omnipresent stages comprise areas of exposed panel stained and delineated as planks at raking angles (the off-kilter quality is especially pronounced in *Kolan get manman yo*, where the stage metamorphoses into a keyboard played by an antic figure). Screen-printed strips and patches of paper adhered to the works' surfaces seem to pop slightly forward, while pours of acrylic medium and direct painting atop carved and collaged areas hem in the layers. The pictorial plane is relatively shallow, compressing all the visual and material energy.

In an essay accompanying the show, the cultural historian Jerry Philogene writes of William's childhood in Miami and discusses aspects of Haitian culture to which the works refer: tiny machetes that form a surface pattern in one composition, for example, allude to a vanishing Haitian martial art, and heroines of the Haitian Revolution are the subjects of three small, portrait-like paintings. The artist is clearly toying with stereotypes of menace, undercutting

it with a robust sense of humor. We do not know if the tall figure holding a shovel in the handsome *Sa a selman m bezwen* is industrious or malevolent, and presumably that indeterminacy is partly the point. William pays homage to contemporaries like Mickalene Thomas in *Ki moun ki rele Olympia*, with its reclining odalisque, as well as to Manet's racially problematic *Olympia*; in Dantor a Anais, a relatively staid image of a mother and child, one senses an echo of Chris Ofili's dung Madonna. And in the screen-printed collage elements there are hints not only of the colorful fabrics of West Africa but also of the works of Pattern and Decoration artists.

The strength of these paintings lies in their vivid and at times unnerving presence. A group of figures hovers in the air in *Nou tout ansanm*, their bodies embedded in a Spanish moss-like mass overhead and their flailing arms and legs casting an ominous shadow on the stage below. One cannot help but think of them as phantoms born of untold violence, but, even as the figures thrash about, the eyes that constitute them give them a kind of power. Not content to settle into the role of the "object" of our gaze—the Other—William's figures stare out at us with eyes like those in a haunted forest. Even unborn, as with the fetus depicted in *Depi nan vant manman m*, they are characterized from without. Yet, wary and hyperconscious, their vigilance protects them.



# The New York Times



Didier William's multifaceted collages *Peel Back Every Layer*, left, and *Two Dads*.

## WHAT TO SEE IN NEW YORK ART GALLERIES THIS WEEK

**Through Nov. 19. Tiger Strikes Asteroid, 1329 Willoughby Avenue, No. 2A, Brooklyn; tigerstrikesasteroid.com.**

by Will Heinrich

In “Ma tante toya,” one of six incandescent panels making up Didier William’s supremely exciting show “We Will Win” at the artist-run space Tiger Strikes Asteroid in Bushwick, a figure at once ambiguous and unforgettable sits on a shadowy green-and-yellow bed, holding a machete point-down behind her leg so the glittering silver blade shines like a flashlight beam. The only features on the figure’s matte-black face are a couple of squiggly white eyes, but hundreds more eyes also cover her body, slipping over her shoulders like water, modeling her legs like scales, licking at her throat like flames.

Technically, it’s all a collage: The figure is ink on paper, mounted on wood; the machete’s knobby handle, which protrudes from the piece’s surface, is fluid acrylic mixed with stucco; and the bed’s drapery is colored paper marked with powdered charcoal. Those Argus eyes, whether they indicate an invisible spirit who sees all but says nothing, or simply a sensitive person constrained from expressing what she feels, are gouged right through the paper into the blank wood underneath like so many irrevocable wounds.

But the complex way Mr. William uses color within each given segment — particularly the bone-black parsley leaves stamped onto the black paper background, which is also scored with rice-grain-size holes — means that it reads as a painting. It’s just a painting with a preternaturally suggestive texture.

“Two Dads,” by the same token, is the daemon of a batik print, and “Rara,” a seven-and-a-half-foot-long procession of staring, posing apparitions, also covered with eyes, seems constructed of moonlight and ash.

# The New York Times



Didier William's "M mache toupatou ave I," from 2018, wood carving, collage, ink,

## WHAT TO SEE IN NEW YORK ART GALLERIES THIS WEEK

Through Nov. 25 at James Fuentes, 55 Delancey Street, Manhattan; 212-577-1201, [jamesfuentes.com](http://jamesfuentes.com). Through Nov. 24 at Anna Zorina Gallery, 533 West 23rd Street, Manhattan; 212-243-2100, [annazorinagallery.com](http://annazorinagallery.com).

by Martha Schwendener

Didier William's works are often called paintings because they are rectangular, mounted on the wall and approximate the size of traditional easel paintings. The works in "Curtains, Stages, and Shadows, Act 1" at James Fuentes and "Curtains, Stages and Shadows, Act 2" at Anna Zorina, however, are barely painted at all. Instead, Mr. William's method is a clever mix of different two-dimensional mediums: He carves directly into birch panels and arranges his own patterned prints on the surface, using ink and the occasional dash of acrylic paint for emphasis.

This approach, through appearance and illusion, also suits the subject matter of Mr. William, who was born in Haiti. Drawn from the country's history and folklore, as well as his experience of growing up in Miami, his works also probe the idea of having to perform blackness or any kind of identity. Shadowy figures — built from hundreds of tiny eyes that carved into the panels like pixels and return the viewer's gaze — represent family members, Voodoo spirits or leaders in the Haitian Revolution. (Mr. William shifted from abstract painting to representing black bodies after Trayvon Martin, an unarmed teenager, was shot to death in 2012.) And machetes suggest violent massacre as well as "tire machet," the traditional Haitian martial art.

Mr. William's crafty, enigmatic and sometimes cryptic oeuvre is underscored by his titles, which are in untranslated Haitian Kreyòl, and include proverbs, family expressions and crude street slang. None of theatrical effects would matter, though, if Mr. William's paintings didn't grab your attention and hold it, building a sense of tension — even anticipation for Act 3.