

DIDIER WILLIAM

Selected Press

Art | In Conversation

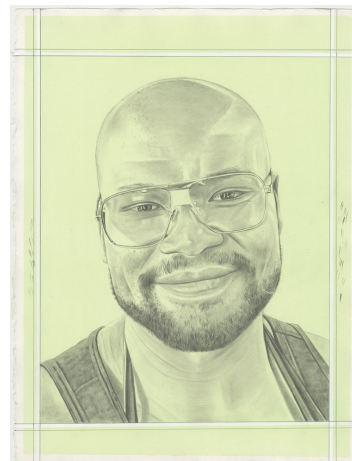
Didier William with Charles M. Schultz

“I wanted a discrete object to do the temporal work of reading a body in space. And I trusted that painting could do that work.”

In Miami, the largest gathering of Didier William’s work yet to be assembled took place. Years of conversations and studio visits with Dr. Erica Moiah James led to a selection of paintings and prints that convey a passage of artistic evolution. The passage is concerned with the figure. Twenty years ago William had been exploring abstract compositions until the murder of Trayvon Martin compelled a new direction. This exhibition begins at that moment and concludes at its chronological counterpart: the birth of a child and the formation of a family.

The conversation that follows took place on the Rail’s *New Social Environment*. Didier William dialed in from his studio in Philadelphia. It was midday and his interlocutor was Charles Schultz, the Rail’s managing editor. In the hour that followed William and Schultz presented images of the artist’s exhibition as they discussed aspects of his working process, the connection between his life and the imagery that occurs on his surfaces, and how a sense of loss can be an important part of representation.

Charles M. Schultz (Rail): Your exhibition is titled *Nou Kite Tout Sa Dèyè*, which means “We’ve left that all behind.” Would you tell me about that phrase?



Portrait of Didier William, pencil on paper by Phong H. Bui.

ON VIEW

Moca North Miami

Didier William: Nou Kite

Tout Sa Dèyè

November 2, 2022–April 16,
2023

Didier William: The title came about in several meetings with the curator, Dr. Erica Moiah James, who is based in Miami. We had several lead up meetings to talk about the work, but we'd have longer, more personal conversations too, about my family, about our immigration story, about life in Miami, and she would often ask what my parents thought of my work. What kind of input did my parents give me? Because I'm making work that references anecdotes from Haiti, from our early years in the United States. And oftentimes, when I asked them about back home—our house back home, the people back home, all that kind of stuff—they would often say “Nou Kite Tout Sa Dèyè,” or in English, “We left all that behind,” “Forget about it.” “We're here now.”

I think in many ways they were sort of shielding themselves from the trauma that was embedded in those narratives, and maybe in their minds they were inadvertently shielding me from it too. So there was always this wall of memory or this wall of distance that I felt existed for them. We moved to Miami when I was six years old, so most of what I know about Haiti is pulled from them and my brothers.

I think for both Dr. James and me there was a degree of irony to the title because as many of us who are from other countries know, you can't in fact leave that stuff behind. It stays with you. It's in your corporeal reality. It's in your skin. It's in your body. It's in the material around you. I mean, our house was full of artifacts and textiles and things that my mom brought with her from Haiti. Each of those things contain one of these narratives.

Rail: Dr. James is from the Bahamas. Is that right?

William: Yes, she was the Director of the National Gallery in the Bahamas and she taught art history at Yale for a bit. Now she is a professor at University of Miami. When the opportunity for the show came about, MOCA was working primarily with guest curators. Chana Sheldon, the museum's executive director, and I immediately thought of Dr. James.

Rail: In the process of working with Dr. James, what surprised you? What insight did she provide into your work that you didn't see?

William: I mean, she's a phenomenal reader and thinker of images. She was able to take a broad scope—sort of a bird's eye view—of my practice, and connect dots that I wasn't thinking about. There's one painting in the show, *I Remember When I Was a Little Girl* (2011), that I made at the Marie Walsh Sharpe Art Foundation residency—now the Sharpe-Walentas Studio Program. It was one of the first paintings I made where I was returning to the figure. Initially I didn't think it would be part of the show. But Dr. James did an amazing job of kind of zooming back and saying, “Hey, wait a minute. A lot of the things we're talking about here, the checkpoint for that happened with this painting.”



Didier William, *I Remember When I Was a Little Girl*, 2015. Acrylic, oil, wood stain on panel, 60 x 48 inches. Courtesy the artist.

Rail: It's the earliest painting in the exhibition, is that correct? And the only non-representational work?

William: It's the earliest painting in the show and the only work that doesn't have any wood carving. It was the first painting to go back to the figure. There's this kind of inverted phallus, this inverted sexualized form—it was one of the first times I started to think about how gender and sex will be re-performed now that I'm returning to the figure. The way I was conceptualizing queerness in the work, not necessarily even having the language of queerness at the time. It's positioned immediately to the left when you walk into the exhibition before you enter the more sort of anecdotal, metaphorical, mythological paintings.

Rail: So it's one of the first works the viewer sees when they enter the exhibition space.

William: Yeah, it's funny because looking at it now, I can see that the bottom of this painting is what my work looked like, say from 2009 to 2011: mostly non-representational, quite abstract. I had just left graduate school and I wanted a break from the body; I wanted a break from anatomy; I wanted a break from figure. I wanted to see what the material could do, setting up certain conditions of friction, and using gravity to sort of engage those conditions. I was looking at Frankenthaler and Norman Lewis and a lot of abstract expressionist painting.

But then something drove me back to the body. It coincided with the beginning of state-sanctioned violence on Black and brown people being captured on film. Namely Trayvon Martin, who was murdered not that far away from Miami, in Sanford, Florida, where I grew up. I started to rethink how I was conceptualizing figuration, how I was conceptualizing the body. How I was conceptualizing representation and what risks were involved in that—what was at stake in the process, both for me and for the viewer. I started asking myself different questions: How do I slow it down even further from just rote representation? How do I completely halt the process? How do I halt the circuitry of looking between a viewer and a body on a painting? I wasn't interested in switching to video or anything. I wanted a discrete object to do the temporal work of reading a body in space. And I trusted that painting could do that work.

One day not too long afterwards I made the painting, *His Life Depends On Spotted Lies* (2015), which was the first time I started carving anything. It's a much smaller piece. It's 20 by 16 inches—a very small piece. There was a kind of portrait figure, and a green and blue tapestry in the back. The figure itself was stained, and then I think out of frustration or boredom or just the curious desire to see something else in the picture, I started carving onto the surface. Instead of painting the eyes where they would normally go, I carved two eyes onto the surface of the panel. Because my MFA was in painting and printmaking I had all these wood carving materials at my disposal. I was working on this panel, and I just kept carving into it. I carved from the top of the head to the base of the neck. And at the end of that experience, I realized that I hadn't just removed something, I had added something to the panel. I thought I wasn't engaged in this reductive process, but in effect, taking something away actually added something to the panel that wasn't previously there. And I didn't know how to name it. I didn't know what it was. I didn't know anything about it. I just knew that it was deeply, physically satisfying. Something happened that I've sort of been in that curious zone with carving ever since, except now it's ballooned into my entire studio practice.

[*Laughter*]



Didier William, *His Life Depends on Spotted Lies*, 2015. Wood stain, pastel, wood carving on panel, 20 x 16 inches. Courtesy the artist.

Rail: A lot of your work is quite large. How did your experience of gouging into the panels change as you began to scale up your efforts?

William: In the beginning I was doing it manually, which as you can imagine was torture on my wrist. Actually, I made the first one on my bed in my Brooklyn apartment, and then I had to dust off all the sawdust so that I wouldn't get stabbed by it when I went to sleep. [Laughter] Subsequently, I started to wonder what kinds of tools I could use to dig deeper and further into the surface of the wood. I worked with a fabricator who is based in New York and he suggested birch because it is a soft material. So I started carving into birch, and then started thinking about the scale and size of the bodies, and how I could replicate the drawings that I was beginning with. Everything begins with drawing.

I have hundreds and hundreds of drawings that don't ever make it to the paintings. The drawings that I'm excited about and want to invest more into—I transfer them onto the surface of the panel. They then get stained with dark, almost black ink. Once that is dry, I draw other figures onto the panel. And then they get carved with a rotary tool. So it sounds like a dentist's office in my studio pretty much all day. [Laughter]

In the beginning, the figures were much smaller and more intimate. But I wanted them to be larger than life, to be just beyond life-scale, to stand up outside of the panel as if they were eight or nine feet tall. And I've 's something sort of autobiographical about the bodies—I'm a pretty big guy, and I always have been. I've always been aware of how the measurements of the conventional world are designed with a particular body in mind. When you are outside of that particular measurement scale, you're hyper aware of it. How could I turn that into a super-strength rather than something that was diminishing?

So my figures are always in the space of titans, sort of a dream space—I don't even think about them as human. I don't think of them as people. I think of them as apparitions or titans, something aspirational, which allows me to project further into the mythology of these narratives.

Rail: Before we go too much further into your process and history, I want to come back to 's a big show; there's more than forty paintings in two rooms. One room is set up as an anti-chamber; the walls are dark. And then there's a secondary room that is large and bright. There are three major new paintings in the smaller room, and a selection of your prints. Why these three paintings? Why this selection of prints?



Installation view, *Didier William: Nou Kite Tout Sa Dèyè*, November 2nd, 2022-April 16, 2023, at the Museum of Contemporary Art, North Miami (MOCA). Courtesy of The Museum of Contemporary Art. Photo: Michael Lopez.

William: Initially we didn't think about including prints. But as of about the last maybe three, four years, the discrete print has started to become a bigger part of my practice—right around when Dr. James and I started having our conversations. As she started to discover some of these prints, she suggested we include a selection in the exhibition. That selection occupies one wall, and then facing those prints are three paintings: two are of these houses—*83rd St* and *125th St* (both 2022)—that are sort of precariously and buoyantly nestled within this mass of bodies, and the third, titled *Just Us Three* (2021), is figurative. That was a difficult painting because it is about my husband and I becoming parents. I knew I wanted to make a painting about that experience but I could have never anticipated that our journey would align almost exactly with a global pandemic.

I remember I sat back in my studio and thought, “What do I do? How do I make? How do I have this 's gonna play out.” I wanted to make a piece that highlighted the fact that for about a year it was just the three of us: myself, my husband, and our daughter. We couldn't introduce our friends to our baby, we couldn't introduce our family to our baby. It felt like we were sitting on this sort of precarious cliff, not knowing what was behind us, and not knowing what was ahead of us, but needing to just sort of hold on to one another as best as we could. That's how the painting came about.



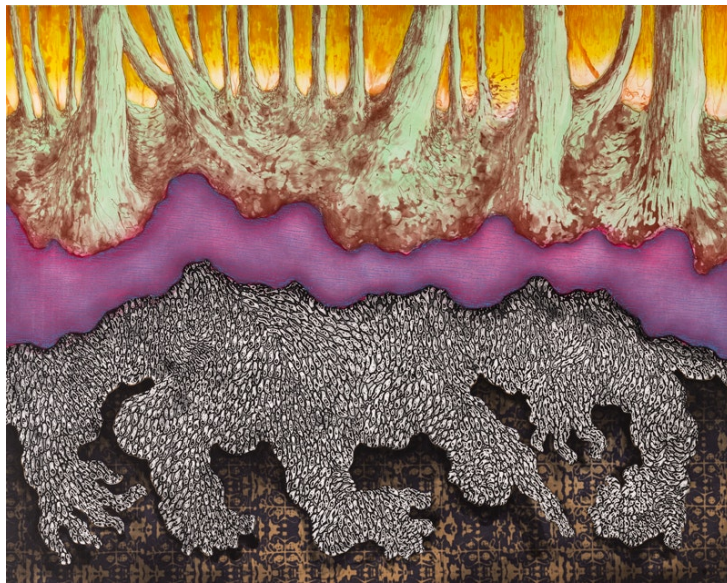
Didier William, *Just Us Three*, 2021. Acrylic, oil, wood carving on panel, 104 x 68 inches. Courtesy James Fuentes Gallery.

Rail: I love how the body language is not what one would expect. There's no cradle. I like the way the small figure is crawling on the two larger figures, which are interlocked in a way that communicates togetherness, even tenderness, despite the fact that they're not doing typical things like hugging or holding hands or anything like that. How did you decide on this body language?

William: Well, I wanted it awkward. [*Laughter*]. Anybody who has had a child can attest to this awkwardness. It was our first baby—we now have two kids—and there was a lot of awkwardness going from a couple to being a family of three. The entire landscape of our home changed, and our relationships to each other did too. I was trying to figure out how to handle this new unit of three and I didn't want sentimentality to take over the painting. I wanted the bodies' sort of Tetris-like attempt to interlock with one another to be the fulcrum of the painting.

Rail: Thanks Didier, that's beautiful. How about the two paintings of houses, *83rd St.* and *125 St.*? I noticed that the shape enveloping the houses along the bottom is similar to the shapes in the prints on the wall nearby, titled *Cursed Grounds: Blessed Bones* (2022). What's the relationship or connection here?

William: The two works aren't connected, but I have been thinking a lot about this idea of looking at two spaces at once, looking at multiple spaces at once—so the picture plane straddles an area above some kind of cross section of Earth and an area below. That has become this whole series of works called “Cursed Grounds.” The one in the exhibition, *Cursed Grounds: Blessed Bones*, is a four-plate copper etching that was printed in collaboration with Harlan & Weaver press in New York. Felix Harlan, master printer, did a phenomenal job with that print. And then the others have been paintings that also follow this kind of stratified earth composition where you're looking at an area above and you're looking at an area that's at eye level, and you're looking at an area below. And the area below makes up these conglomerations of bodies, these ancestors, for lack of a better word. And then the area above, in some cases, is a landscape.



Didier William, *Cursed Grounds: Blessed Bones*, 2022. Multiplate color intaglio. 44 x 35 5/8 inches., Courtesy James Fuentes Gallery.

In that particular print it's this park that's close to our house, a little park that we like to take my daughter to, and it has these really beautiful trees that she loves to run around in. I took a picture of it, drew those trees out, and then in print—I think it's a four or five color spit bite that makes up those trees. At the bottom of the piece the eye pattern is printed in a flat bite. And then there's another pattern underneath it, which you can see a little bit in yellow, like a yellowy-green, and that's the Haitian voodoo *Lwa*, Papa Legba, who's the guardian of the underworld. And so you're looking at these two different spaces at the same time that offer two completely different realities. And one thing to mention in the print, I really wanted the bodies to feel like they were made out of chains or something. Once we printed that proof and I saw the beautiful capacity of intaglio. But next to the trees it felt really rigid and stiff, and I loved that. If it could be auditory, I wanted it to sound like chains rattling—completely different from the way that conglomeration of bodies happens in the paintings.

The two paintings that you were mentioning depict the first two houses that my family lived in, in Miami. Those paintings came about not necessarily suddenly, but once I knew the show was going to happen, and I knew the show was gonna include all of these paintings that were metaphorical and mythological, and me sort of indulging all of these fantastical modes of storytelling, it felt important to bookend the exhibition and frame the literal location where those things took place. Some of the paintings are about events that happened in Miami with me and my brothers, our immigration process, intimate moments that happened to me in Miami, accidents that happened in Miami, traumatic and horrific moments that happened in Miami —the containers for all of those things were these two houses we lived in.

For those two paintings, I wanted to shift the visual language and pull up architectural renderings of those houses and try to remain faithful to those renderings and those measurements, and preserve and respect the integrity of these houses, even though they're sort of nestled in these masses; they're nestled in these spaces, and still subject to that fragile history. I wanted the houses to sort of reign supreme in the exhibition and claim that space right away, and really in some ways, honor those houses because they were the spaces that kept us safe and kept us secure and protected us when we were applying for American citizenship and contained a lot of the documents that kept my family in good standing with the American government. And so when you walk into the exhibition, you see the green house and then you see the orange house, and then in between them on the perpendicular wall is *Just Us Three*.



Didier William, *125th St.*, 2022. Acrylic, ink, and wood carving on panel, 70 x 106 inches. Courtesy James Fuentes Gallery.

Rail: It's a beautiful triangulation of paintings and ideas. It communicates a whole lot about what builds life, what sustains life, what structures enable life. To me, it looks like the two houses, and the natural or ancestral zones they're nestled in, are floating in this amorphous area. Do you read it as floating? Do you read it differently?

William: I don't object to floating. I like to think of them as groundless. I've always wanted to remove ground and remove gravity from the paintings, but keep their presence intact. If I could extract gravity from the reality that I'm trying to depict, but keep everything else contained, what kind of liberation could that offer my characters? What kind of freedom could that offer me in terms of presenting these places in a way that was more honest and truthful to what I and my loved ones experienced?

Process-wise, it's always a question for me when I'm building these competitions: how do I make them as groundless as possible? One of my favorite painters is Robert Colescott. In many ways he used a similar strategy where you feel like the entire thing is sort of—like if you tilted the painting this way, it would slide off the table or slide off the ground. I think it added this level of perceptual instability that made Colescott's painting even more politically jarring, and even more powerful. Not just the content, but that the actual infrastructure of the painting—the pegs were being pulled out of it. That's always been 've always envied that, and wanted to replicate it in my work. Others have mentioned it as a kind of a lift, as a kind of a groundlessness, and I love that because it all points to this idea that flight is liberatory. And that's kind of where I want that to sit.



Installation view, *Didier William: Nou Kite Tout Sa Dèyè*, November 2nd, 2022–April 16, 2023, at the Museum of Contemporary Art, North Miami (MOCA). Courtesy of The Museum of Contemporary Art. Photo: Michael Lopez.

Rail: As you're talking about groundlessness and removing gravity, I'm reminded of the sculpture you made for the show, *Poto Mitan 2* (2022). It's a stunning work. I see bodies in a vertical stack that sort of hangs in the center of the gallery. I know that it connects to ideas of 's a sense of awkwardness as well in the way that you've stacked them. Do you see it similarly? As an escape from gravity and a move towards liberation?

William: It hangs from airline wires that you can see a little bit, but it doesn't touch the ground. It hovers maybe eight inches above the floor. So it just kind of floats in the center of the room as you're looking at the rest of the paintings.

When Dr. James and I were talking about the show and I pointed to my interest and previous history in sculpture, I decided to make a new work for the exhibition, the stack of bodies that's about 12 feet tall, and title it "Poto Mitan." In Haitian voodoo the poto mitan is the pole in the center of the room around which ritual and worship takes place. The pole is considered to be the portal or gateway between our world and the world of the gods. Very often you would hang worship objects, or precious objects—things that you love—on the pole. Many times it's made of wood, and sometimes it's even made of a living tree.

For my work, I wanted the pole to still be a portal or a gateway, but I wanted that gateway to be made of bodies, because I think when we're talking about narratives of immigration, oftentimes the human unit of measurement is the body. The way in which we gauge our distance between now and something that we call home is either through our bodies or the bodies of the ones that we love. So it made sense for me to take this thing that would normally be an inanimate object, and animate it with the bodies of my characters, so that it felt like the bodies were jumping from the surface of the paintings and right into the middle of the room. And it's right in the center so that when you walk into the exhibition, you sort of have to walk around it in order to see the paintings, and it's always sort of hovering behind you too.

Rail: Earlier you were talking about your move from non-representational work to representational work through the tragic death of Trayvon Martin. But it wasn't just bodies that began to appear in your work, but bodies that—as another writer called it—have an "epidermal eye-shield." So now you've been doing it for, well, a decade. How has the meaning of a body covered with eyes shifted for you? Or maybe it hasn't? What's happened over the last decade?

William: Yeah, definitely, but I've only loosely taken stock of all the ways that it has changed. Initially, the startling thing about it, the thing that surprised me, was that it forced me to be super present. That's what I loved about it, but that was also the thing that scared me, because it brought me right to the surface of the work. It was a literal measurement of the amount of time I spent at that surface, about six to eight inches away.

So the reductive process gave way to this experience of complete presence that I wanted to happen for my viewer too. For me, that gets closer to the experience of representation than any kind of illusionistic process. And that moment has evolved over time to become this question of presence that I think is essential when we're talking about representation at large, but specifically the representation of narratives that include Black and brown people. It's a temporal, fragile, vulnerable process that I've always wanted to hold on to and insist that my viewers experience as well.

Over time, that moment has expanded to not just include the bodies in the paintings, but it's now part of the way that the actual architecture in the paintings is built. Now the wall is made up of this map of Haiti. Now the fabric on the bedsheet is made up of these symbols in Haitian voodoo that my mom talked about, but that I never thought about in this way. It's turned into a strategy to think about how everything materializes. I became less interested in the perceptual tricks I can use to make things look more real, and more interested in the temporal process of bringing those things to an experiential condition for the viewer. The first time I saw that happening was when I started carving eyes onto the bodies of the figures. Now, it permeates every part of the surface.

Rail: It's fascinating to listen to you talk about how you're layering information into the paintings in an increasingly complicated manner. I find one of the challenges to doing that is that your audience doesn't always have access to that information. We come to the work with what we have, we find what we find. And—

William: Well, that's an important point, because it highlights the fact that loss is part of representation. Ninety-nine percent of the time loss is very much part of the experience of those who are being represented. And so I like the idea that there is something lost in the process here and contending with that loss is part of what we're talking about when we talk about representation at large, but specifically the representation of Black and brown people whose histories are subject to a tremendous amount of loss. I think wrestling with that condition, both in the process and in the way that work is read and consumed, needs to be centered. That's very important for me.

Sometimes the works are titled in Haitian Creole. Sometimes I've given translations and other times I've asked my gallery not to give translations. And that means some people won't know what a painting is titled, and I'm okay with that because there are other layers of legibility for that person to hook on to and get into the content of the work. Stacking those layers of legibility is really exciting for me, because sometimes it gives way to things I never even imagined.

Rail: I couldn't agree with you more about that, but the one thing I would challenge is the condition of loss for the viewer. I mean you need to have once had something to feel its loss. I can't read Haitian Creole, I never could—I don't feel that I lost anything, just that something is outside my understanding, outside my knowledge body. It's like looking at a language I can't read; I can tell it's presenting a message, but I can't access it. So maybe less a feeling of loss and more a sense of opacity. And you were talking earlier about slowing down. This is one of the ways that I think that happens for a viewer. Processing the information takes time.

William: Thanks, I love that point, and I love the Glissantian nod to opacity there. You're right, the speed of it is critical. The slowing down is critical. In person, the layering is obviously much more pronounced than any photograph could capture and it leads to the question of overlap, which brings one to consider the edges. I nerd out on the edges that happen on the surfaces quite a bit. Oftentimes that's one of the ways I judge whether or not a work is finished. It really has less to do with the picture, and more to do with what the surface and the edges are doing to one another. Once that friction reaches a kind of crescendo, that's when I get most excited and think, "Okay, this painting is doing what I wanted it to do."

Rail: I want to take a little bit of a side turn. We've talked a lot about the objects, but we haven't talked too much about people in your life. If there were two people that you had to think of who've had a profound impact on your evolution as an artist, who would you name? What stories would you tell me?

William: The first one is a no-brainer: my mom. Oftentimes, people ask if there are any other artists in my family, and we don't have any other visual artists in my family, but my mom is a chef's been cooking her entire life. She started at the American Embassy in Haiti when she was thirteen years old. She virtually lived there and grew to run it. That's where she learned how to cook. And then once we moved to the United States, she had her own restaurant with a friend of hers. But the way in which she thinks about food is how I think about painting, and the alchemy that she brings to it. I hung out with her as a kid constantly and saw her taking raw material, and turning it into stuff that smelled and tasted like magic. I experienced that my entire adolescence, and I absorbed it. Now I do the exact same thing but with paint and paper, and wood, and acrylic and oil and pigment. But that alchemy, the first place I witnessed and learned the potential of it was watching my mother in the kitchen.

The other person who comes to mind right away is one of my mentors at graduate school, Rochelle Feinstein. She was the first person to encourage me to think about where the overlap might occur between my paintings and my prints. Now my printmaking practice and my painting practice have become so enmeshed that they're kind of indistinguishable from one another.

Rail: Now I'm curious, your beautiful painting of a big bowl of soup, *Soup Joumou* (2020), is that piece in honor of your mother?



Didier William, *Soup Joumou*, 2020. Acrylic, ink, wood carving on panel, 22 x 32 inches. Courtesy James Fuentes Gallery.

William: I mean, it's very much a nod to my mom, for all the reasons I described. I made that painting at a time when I had just started making my own soup joumou. Soup joumou is squash soup, and we Haitians make it on January 1. January 1, in addition to being the beginning of the new year, is Haitian Independence Day. And this was a culinary masterpiece that was forbidden to the enslaved West Africans in Haiti. Promptly upon independence it became the national dish, and Dessalines wanted it served and consumed on January 1 to commemorate this thing that was once forbidden to us now being something we enjoy and consume as rightfully

ours. And so to this day, on January 1, if you're Haitian, you need to either make it yourself or go find a Haitian restaurant, go to an aunt's house or an uncle's house and find it. When we had kids, my mom said, "Well, now you have your own kids, so you need to make your own soup." And so I made it and snapped a picture of it and sent it to her. And she asked me how it tasted and I said it tastes pretty good, but not like yours. But I liked the picture. And so I printed a picture out, and brought it with me to the studio and made a painting out of it.

Contributor

Charles Schultz

Charles M. Schultz is Managing Editor of the *Brooklyn Rail*.



THE ART NEWSPAPER

From working at the dollar store to exhibiting at the museum next door: artist Didier William returns to Miami

The Haitian-American artist's largest retrospective to date, staged at the Museum of Contemporary Art North Miami, is in the very neighbourhood where he grew up



Didier William's exhibition includes paintings of two of his childhood homes in Miami after his family emigrated from Haiti

Photo: Ryan Collerd, courtesy of the Pew Center for Arts and Heritage

Didier William's current retrospective is, more so than most, an origin story. The artist's family emigrated from Port-au-Prince in Haiti to North Miami when he was a child, and he grew up in two houses near the present site of the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) North Miami, which is hosting the show curated by Erica Moiah James (until 16 April 2023). Two of the most recent works on view are paintings of those childhood homes, each floating uneasily on a conglomeration of limbs rendered in William's distinctive, densely rendered brushstrokes.

In another real sense, the exhibition—and William's work more broadly—is about the fluidity and hybridity of identity and experiences of dislocation, as intimated by its title, *Nou Kite Tout Sa Dèyè*, Haitian Creole for "We've Left That All Behind". William discusses the experience of returning to the neighbourhood of his youth, taking stock of his oeuvre up to this point and his first foray into large-scale sculpture.



Didier William's *Mosaic Pool, Miami* (2021) is on show at MOCA North Miami in an exhibition of more than 40 works

Photo: Constance Mensh, courtesy of the collection of Reginald and Aliya Browne

The Art Newspaper: Can you tell me how the large sculpture you're debuting in North Miami came about?

Didier William: Last year I did a site-specific installation for Facebook in New York and that was the first time I had done anything 3D. It was a 72ft by 15ft wall, with six of my figures floating in front of it, and the figures had been cut out—so imagine if the figures in my paintings had stepped out of the paintings. On the wall was a custom-printed wallpaper with patterns that had been pulled from the paintings, and then I collaborated with a lighting manufacturer who made LEDs to light the backs of the figures so that instead of casting a shadow, they emitted light from behind them.

Erica Moiah James saw that piece at Facebook, really loved it and asked me to consider a sculpture for Miami. So the show in Miami has a 13ft-tall stack of bodies that hovers in the middle of the room. Its title is *Potomitan*, which means the pole in the middle of a structure, which is borrowed from Haitian Vodou. In Haitian Vodou, you would pray and have ceremonies around the potomitan, which would sometimes be an actual living tree. Sometimes it's a wooden structure that you would build and put different worship objects around. That pole is where the gods travel from the other world into this world. But in my piece that pole, that structure, is made up of bodies, a towering stack of bodies, the bodies themselves being the throughway or transitory material through which we access life in this world and life in the next world.

The first works visitors to the exhibition see are two paintings of your childhood homes in North Miami; why did you choose to represent such tangible, real-world places?

They are containers. When we first moved to this country, we weren't documented, so we had a long, several-years process of going to immigration and naturalisation services, setting up appointments, getting job permits, getting a green card, becoming American citizens, my brothers and I learning English. My parents tried to find jobs, and tried to find schools for us. I take a lot of that anecdotal material that comes from those moments and find the slice in there that I think can become a painting. But the container for all that stuff was these two houses, all of that activity was happening in these two-bedroom, one-bathroom houses where my brothers and my parents were desperately trying to start a life in the United States.



William's *Gwo Madame* (2020)

Courtesy of the Braiteh Foundation Collection

More broadly, what has the experience of reinvesting in this place where you spent such important years of your life brought up for you?

I like how you describe it as a kind of reinvestment. The museum likes to use the word “homecoming” and I don’t because I think homecoming implies some kind of resolution or catharsis, and I’m not crazy about that implication. I think of it more as an introduction or a reintroduction. The Miami that I grew up in is very different from the Miami that exists today. And the 16-year-old kid who worked at the dollar store on 125th Street, which is right next door to the museum, is not the same person as the 39-year-old, out, queer dad who’s returning to Miami to show this work.

I want to give those two parts of self their deserved integrity, and not assume that we’re “closing the circle” and “bringing the work back home”. Because that image also implies that somehow the conception of home is fixed and, again, within the context of an immigrant narrative, home is never a fixed institution—it’s a kind of organic, shifting, multivalent thing that you can never really quite latch onto. That’s how I’ve always experienced it as a person in the world, but also how I’ve always constructed it in the narratives of the paintings. So one of the things I think about a lot with bringing the work back to Miami is language, the power of language and how the language that I use to describe the paintings—the art historical language, the Creole language, the material language—is gonna be very different in Miami, in a community that has a large immigrant population and a large Haitian population. The symbolism and the storytelling will play out very differently and I’m excited to see what happens.

- [Didier William: Nou Kite Tout Sa Dèyè ↗](#), *Museum of Contemporary Art North Miami, until 16 April 2023*

CALENDAR

THURSDAY, JUNE 8, 2023 :: LATIMES.COM/CALENDAR



“PLONJE (DIVE)” is part of Didier William’s show “Things Like This Don’t Happen Here” in Hollywood. EVAN BEDFORD James Fuentes

CNN chief ousted after 13 months

Chris Licht was under fire over a town hall with Trump and a profile in the Atlantic.

By Stephen Battaglio

Chris Licht, the beleaguered chairman of CNN, is stepping down, marking an abrupt end to the executive’s rocky 13-month tenure. The company announced his departure Wednesday at its daily editorial meeting. It marks a rapid and spectacular fall for the executive leading the influential cable news channel.

David Zaslav, chief executive of parent company Warner Bros. Discovery, called in to the meeting shortly after informing Licht of the decision.

Zaslav told CNN staffers that Licht’s job was “never going to be easy” and said he wished him well.

“For a number of reasons, things didn’t work out and that’s unfortunate,” Zaslav said, according to a CNN report. “It’s really unfortunate. And ultimately that’s on me. And I take full responsibility for that.”

Zaslav told CNN employees the company would be “conducting a wide search” internally and externally for the network’s new chief, a process expected to take “a while.”

Licht has been under intense fire since last week, when a lengthy Atlantic magazine profile of Licht outraged top executives within the company, along with the rank and file who were already in a deep funk over the network’s disastrous May 10 town hall with former President Trump. CNN’s prime-time ratings — already in decline — have [See Licht, E2]

Supernatural plunge

Didier William’s dazzling figures pulse with life, return curious gaze of viewers

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 the 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 [See William, E2]



ROGINA MONTGOMERY

Toxic showbiz? ‘Burn It Down’

Maureen Ryan, above, takes industry to task in book, giving voice to voiceless, suggesting ways to fix culture. E3

Comics E4-5
Puzzles E4

Ed Asner’s ghost is raising his eyebrows

Mary McNamara

On Monday, more than a month into the writers’ strike, SAG-AFTRA members agreed that if the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers fails to offer them an acceptable new contract by June 30, they too will strike. Should that happen before the WGA and the AMPTP settle their differences, it would be the first time since 1960 writers and actors have walked off together, further disrupting television and film production. It’s a rare though not



unforeseen situation. If anyone in SAG-AFTRA believes in ghosts, they should be on the lookout for the specter of a balding man standing 5’ 7” with bulldog shoulders, highly significant eyebrows and a picket sign reading, “I told you so.” Ed Asner may have died almost two years ago, but for more than 40 years, he repeatedly predicted the very mess Hollywood finds itself in now.

When actors walked out in 1980, Asner, then-star of “Lou Grant,” a successful spinoff of his iconic role on “The Mary Tyler Moore Show,” became one of the most prominent voices of the strike. Like the one Hollywood is currently facing, it revolved, in large [See Asner, E6]

They laugh it up as just friends



PAUL SARRIS Apple

ESTRANGED best friends Sylvia (Rose Byrne) and Will (Seth Rogen) reconnect at complicated stages in their lives in the L.A.-set Apple TV+ series “Platonic.”

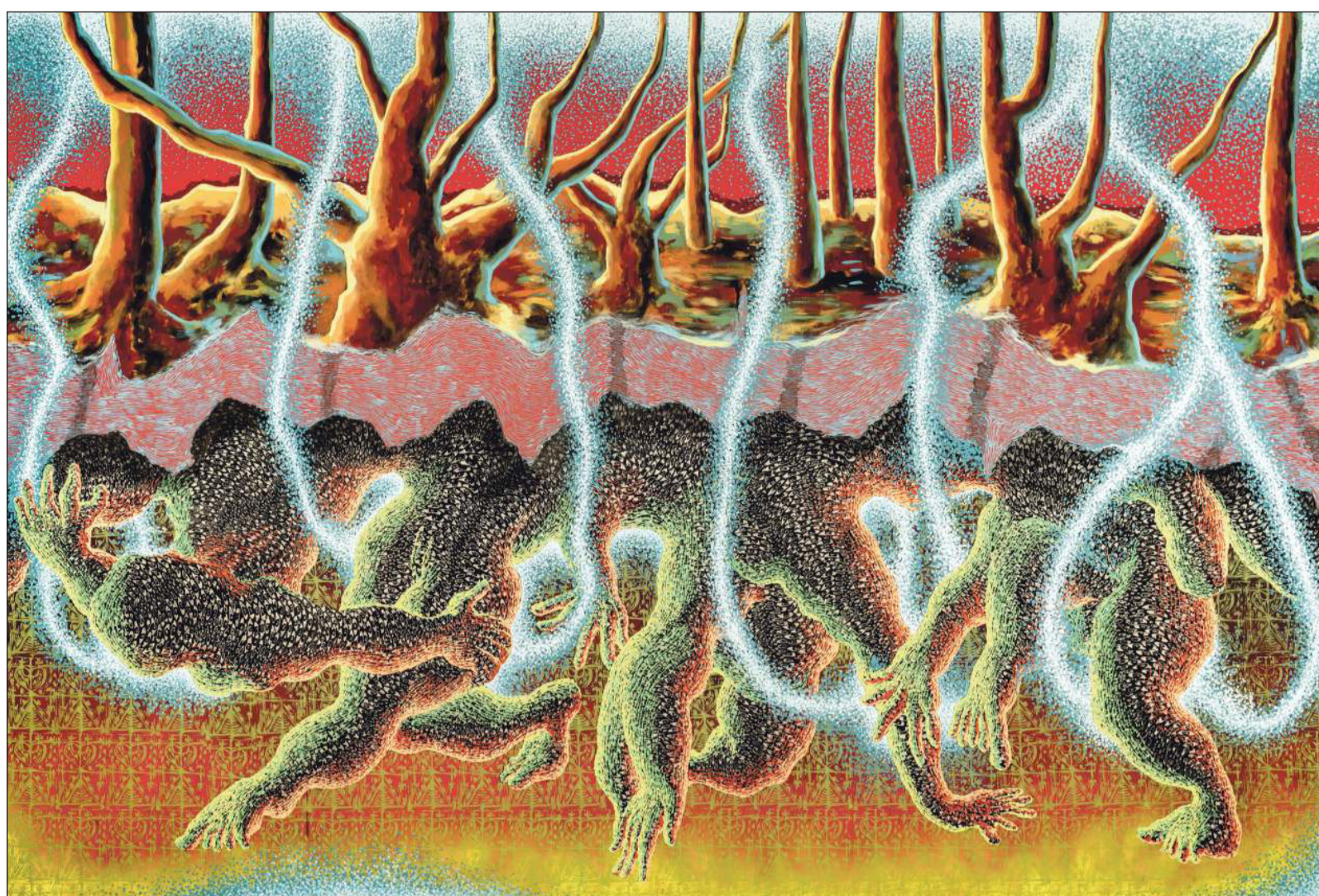
Stars Rose Byrne and Seth Rogen talk about disrupting relationship dynamics in ‘Platonic.’

By Yvonne Villarreal

“When Harry Met Sally” (1989): Men and women can’t just be friends.

“Platonic” (2023): Men and women can just be friends, even after unknowingly snorting cocaine laced with ketamine.

In the Apple TV+ series, which premiered in May and dropped its fifth episode on Wednesday, Seth Rogen and Rose Byrne play estranged besties who rekindle their friendship at pivotal junctures in their lives. Sylvia (Byrne) is a married mother [See ‘Platonic,’ E6]



EVAN BEDFORD James Fuentes

“CURSED GROUNDS: They’ll Come for Us. They’ll Come From the Sky” is among Didier William’s works at the James Fuentes gallery.

A dazzling, otherworldly plunge

[William, from E1] the curious gaze.” William told me in an 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,” critic Zoé Samudzi wrote 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 Haitian-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 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 gallery’s L.A. space 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.

From a distance, the paintings swirl and seethe with motion and bright splashes of color. Particularly memorable is a large horizontal piece 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 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 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.

‘Didier William: Things Like This Don’t Happen Here’

Where: James Fuentes, 5015 Melrose Ave.
When: Through June 17
Info: jamesfuentes.com

CNN fires Licht

[Licht, from E1] dropped 30% since the network aired the Trump event, a clear signal that it angered the audience as well.

Licht expressed regret Monday to staffers about the Atlantic piece, by journalist Tim Alberta, in which Licht disparaged CNN coverage under his popular predecessor Jeff Zucker. The magazine story portrayed Licht as an isolated leader primarily concerned with Zaslav’s mandate that the network be more hospitable to Republicans and address the perceived need to restore trust with viewers.

Amy Entelis, a veteran TV news executive most recently in charge of the network’s long-form content, will be part of a transition team that will find a succes-

sor for Licht. She is also considered a candidate herself in the search.

Entelis will be joined on the team by Virginia Moseley, executive vice president in charge of the network’s news operation; Eric Sherling, executive vice president of programming; and David Leavy, who was named chief operating officer last week.

Many insiders took Leavy’s appointment as a sign that Licht’s days were numbered. He was assigned to oversee the network’s business operations.

Licht’s departure comes after a tumultuous period for CNN that has been marked by cost-cutting pressures, programming missteps and declining viewership.

His ouster is the latest blow to Zaslav, who has confronted a raft of controversies since taking over as the big boss overseeing CNN, Warner Bros.’ film and TV studios and HBO.

Zaslav appointed Licht with the notion that CNN needed an overhaul. Zaslav said publicly that the network had swerved too far into becoming a left-leaning advocate and needed to be more centrist in its approach to the news.

Most insiders took that as a mandate to put more Republicans on the air as guests. It was taken a step further by giving former President Trump — now a candidate for the 2024 Republican presidential nomination — a town hall forum. Trump had been at war with CNN since 2016 and had not appeared for an interview since.

But the town hall conducted in New Hampshire was the beginning of the end for Licht.

CNN anchor Kaitlan Collins questioned Trump for 70 minutes in front of an audience of Republican voters at St. Anselm College in Goffstown. But the crowd gave the event the atmosphere of a Trump rally as audience members cheered the candidate’s answers, even when he disparaged E. Jean Carroll, the woman who was recently awarded \$5 million after a jury found Trump liable for sexually abusing her in 1994.

Trump also repeated his false claims that his 2020 election loss was “rigged” and that then-Vice President Mike Pence could have saved him from defeat by not certifying the election.



JAI LENNARD

THE LAST STRAW for Chris Licht may have been a magazine profile that led him to apologize to staff.

Collins’ attempts to perform fact-checks in real time have often proved futile. Critics said CNN should have known better than to give Trump a forum where it would be impossible to filter out misinformation.

Licht defended the decision to air the program, praising Collins and insisting the event was newsworthy and important to carry. But the harsh assessments of its execution only escalated in the following days.

Veteran CNN correspondent Christiane Amanpour publicly said she disagreed with the decision to present Trump in the format. When many CNN journalists supported her remarks on social media, it was a sign that Licht had lost the confidence of the newsroom.

‘MELTDOWN AT CNN’

With Licht already on shaky ground, the Atlantic published Alberta’s story Friday under the headline “Inside the Meltdown at CNN,” which gave a detailed look at Licht’s first year on the job.

Licht gave full cooperation for the story, and Alberta had extraordinary access during rehearsals for the town hall and preparation of the network’s failed morning program, which was the first programming initiative under Licht’s leadership.

The story reinforced the perception of many CNN insiders that Licht did not understand the culture of the operation and appeared too concerned with undoing the work of Zucker, who allowed more personality and opinion on the network.

The story, which included firsthand descriptions of Licht working out with his physical trainer, proved to be a major embarrassment for Licht, and insiders believed his departure would be imminent.

The drumbeats calling for

Licht’s ouster became louder in the last few days as top CNN talent, including Jake Tapper, Erin Burnett and Anderson Cooper, made their unhappiness with the situation known to Zaslav, according to people familiar with the discussions. The revolt by news anchors was an indication that Licht would be unable to muster support from his troops.

The communications team that signed off on the network’s participation in the story followed Licht out the door.

Matt Dornic, who served as CNN’s head of communications, and Kristine Coratti Kelly, executive vice president and global head of communications, exited Wednesday, according to a person inside the network informed of their status.

Licht came to CNN with impressive credentials.

He helped create “Morning Joe,” the MSNBC program with Joe Scarborough and Mika Brzezinski that is a favorite of Beltway viewers. He launched “CBS This Morning,” which had a five-year run of audience growth until its star co-host Charlie Rose was fired over alleged sexual misconduct.

Licht was later assigned at CBS to oversee “The Late Show With Stephen Colbert,” which stumbled out of the gate when it launched in 2015. The program — helped by the emergence of Trump — turned itself around and became the most-watched late-night comedy program under Licht’s watch.

But Licht’s programming acumen was not on display at CNN. He never came up with a plan to shore up prime time, which lost viewers after the forced departure of one of its most popular hosts, Chris Cuomo.

Licht chose to make a new morning show his first priority. The decision was baf-

fling to some. The time period has never been strong for CNN because viewers who are not looking for political commentary in the morning tend to choose broadcast TV shows that incorporate local traffic and weather.

Licht put together a team of Don Lemon, Poppy Harlow and relative newcomer Collins, who covered the White House for CNN, as co-anchors for “CNN This Morning.” The trio failed to jell, and Lemon, who does not thrive in ensemble settings, was fired after making sexist comments about Republican presidential candidate Nikki Haley.

The ratings have flagged for the program and only Harlow remains at the anchor desk. Collins is taking over the 9 p.m. hour in September.

Some insiders were dumbfounded when Licht’s team wanted to have “CNN This Morning” re-air at 9 a.m. Eastern for West Coast viewers, which meant the network would have been on tape at the start of the business day. It was one of the few ideas Licht was talked out of, according to one former CNN producer.

BUDGET CUTS

Licht was also forced to enact budget cuts and layoffs to help ease the financial pressure on debt-ridden Warner Bros. Discovery. But his choice to end the use of outside production companies for CNN Originals — which turned out high-rated programs that could draw audiences and ad revenues in repeats and on streaming platforms — was considered shortsighted.

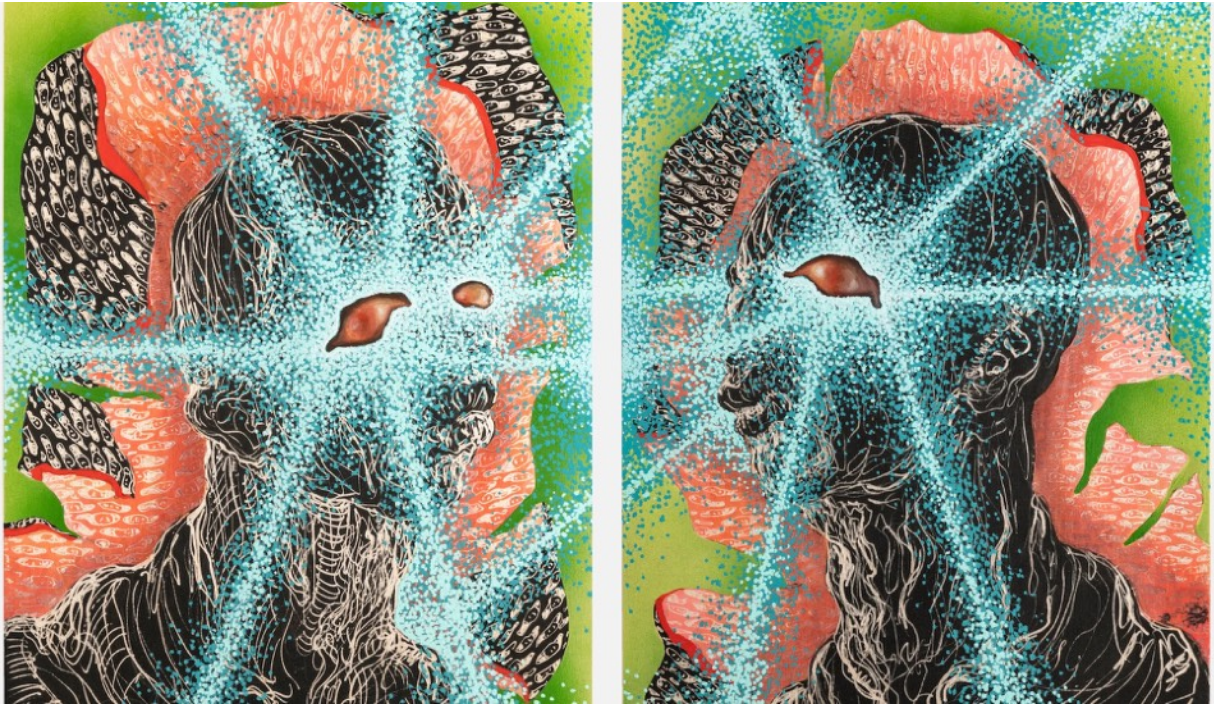
Whoever takes the job of running CNN in the long term will have to help the business adapt to a smaller market of pay TV homes that is diminishing due to cord-cutting. CNN has a robust digital news operation, but the only way to watch its video channel live is with a pay TV subscription.

The company launched a direct-to-consumer streaming service, CNN+, which offered its own lineup of news and talk programming. But Warner Bros. Discovery executives were concerned about the cost of the startup and shut it down shortly after CNN became part of the newly merged company.

Times staff writer Meg James contributed to this report.

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PADRE PIO R 4:20 PM	PADRE PIO R 4:30 7:20	SPIDER-MAN: ACROSS THE SPIDER-VERSE PG 1:00 4:00 7:10	THE BOOGEYMAN PG-13 1:30 4:30 7:30
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WHITE BALLS ON WALLS 1:00 3:10 7:30	YOU HURT MY FEELINGS R 12:55 3:10 5:25 7:40	THE MACHINE R 1:10 4:20 7:10	THE LITTLE MERMAID PG 12:50 3:55 7:00
CHILE 76 (1976) 1:30 7:20	BOOK CLUB: THE NEXT CHAPTER PG-13 1:20 7:10	YOU HURT MY FEELINGS R 12:50 3:05 5:20 7:30	SANCTUARY R 1:20 4:20 7:20
CONCERNED CITIZEN 5:25 PM	IT AIN'T OVER PG 1:30 4:20	THE MACHINE R 1:30 4:20 7:10	GUARDIANS OF THE GALAXY VOL. 3 PG-13 1:00 4:00 6:55
MONICA 1332 Second Street Santa Monica	NEWHALL 22500 Lyons Ave. Santa Clarita	YOU HURT MY FEELINGS R 12:50 3:05 7:30	CLAREMONT 450 W. 2nd Street Claremont
FALCON LAKE 1:30 7:20	THE BOOGEYMAN PG-13 1:30 4:20 7:30	MOON GARDEN 5:15 PM	THE BOOGEYMAN PG-13 1:30 4:20 7:30
FOLLOW HER 4:30 PM	PADRE PIO R 7:00 PM	SANCTUARY R 1:20 4:30 7:20	YOU HURT MY FEELINGS R 12:55 3:10 5:25 7:40
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MASTER GARDENER R 1:00 7:00	ABOUT MY FATHER PG-13 1:10 3:20 5:30 7:40		
BLACKBERRY R 1:10 4:00 7:00	THE LITTLE MERMAID PG 1:15 4:10 7:00		
IT AIN'T OVER PG 1:20 7:20	THE MACHINE R 1:20 4:20		
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THE MELT GOES ON FOREVER: THE ART & TIMES OF DAVID HAMMONS 1:20 7:10	FAST X PG-13 12:50 4:00 7:10		
THE LITTLE MERMAID 4:00 PM	GUARDIANS OF THE GALAXY VOL. 3 PG-13 12:55 6:40		
MONTREAL GIRLS 4:20 PM			

FOR 6/8/2023 ONLY



ART

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 | 6.5.23

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."

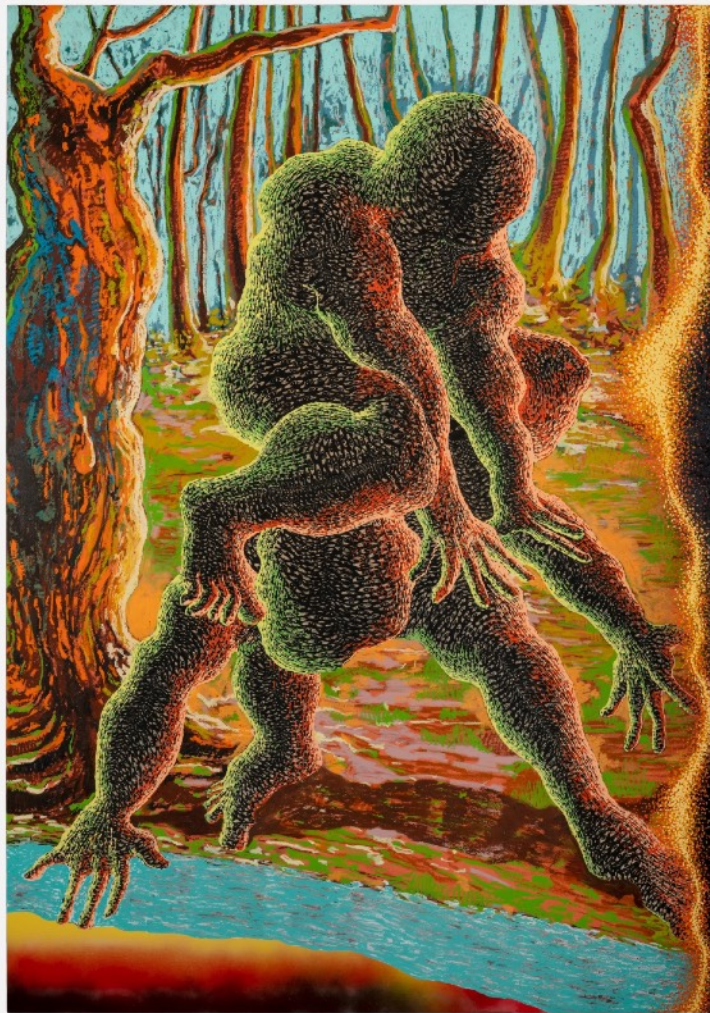


"My Father's Nightmares: My Sleepwalkers Crucible," 2023

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.



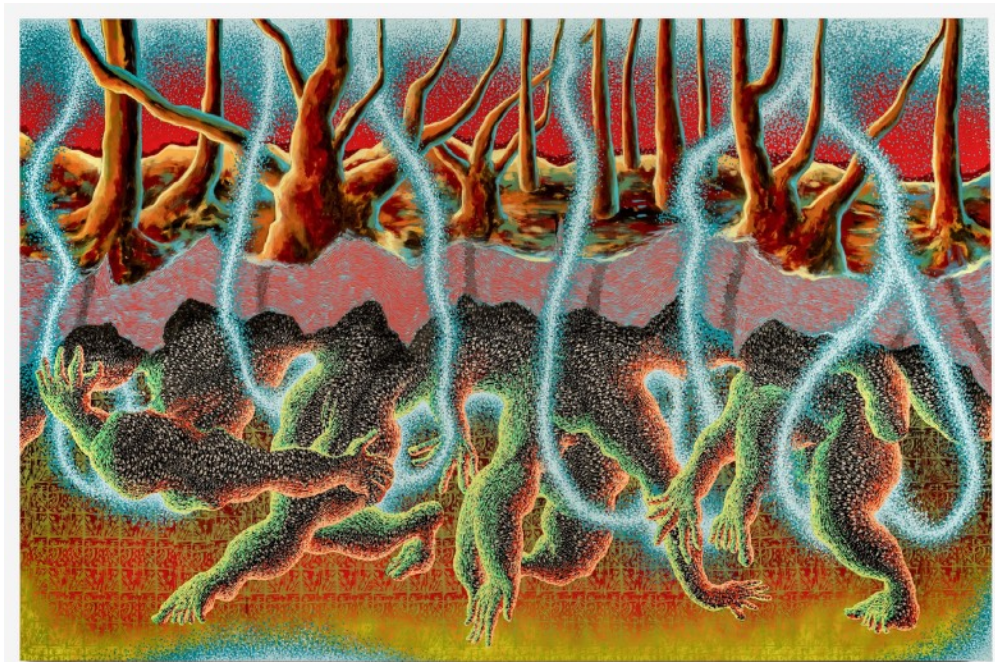
"Cheval: the Other Side of the Mirror is Home," 2023

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.



"Cursed Grounds: They'll Come for Us. They'll Come from the Sky," 2022

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?



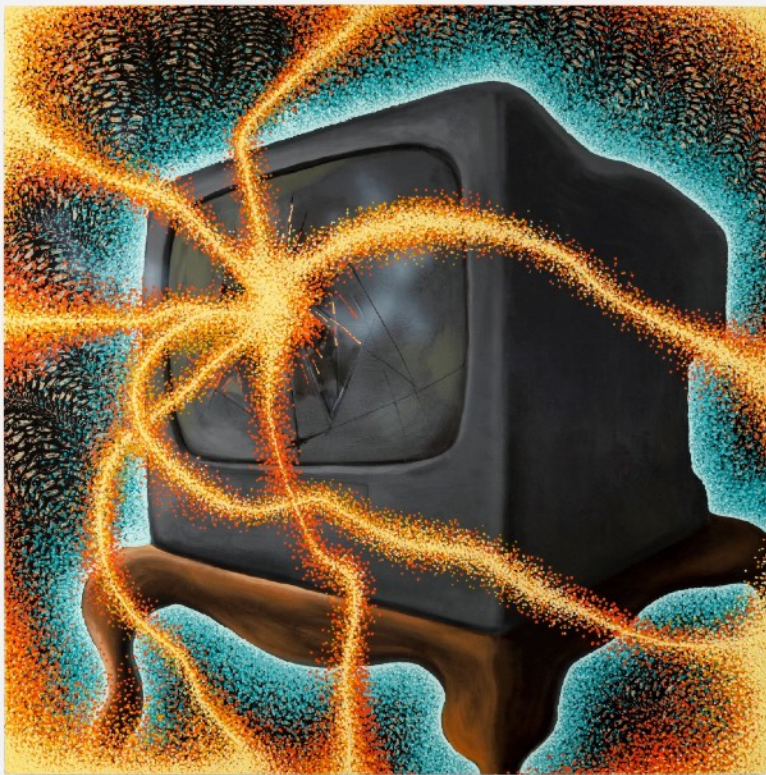
"I Wanted Her to Kill Him, I Know Why She Didn't," 2023

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 lighting comes from the sky, how does that remap an event as it lives in my memory? Now, that's a different kind of realism.



"Viande (Meat)," 2022



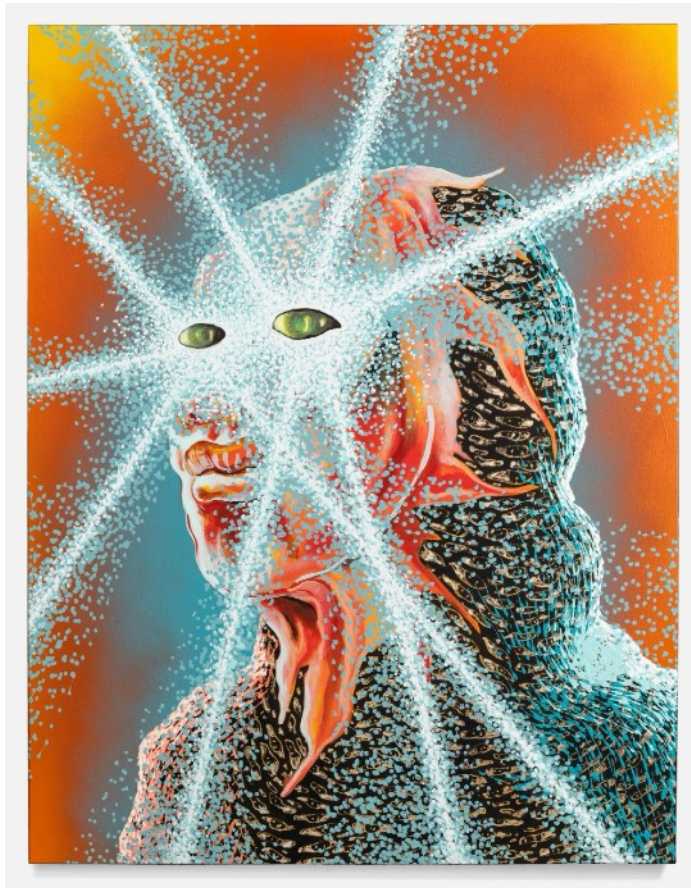
"TV Tyranny," 2023



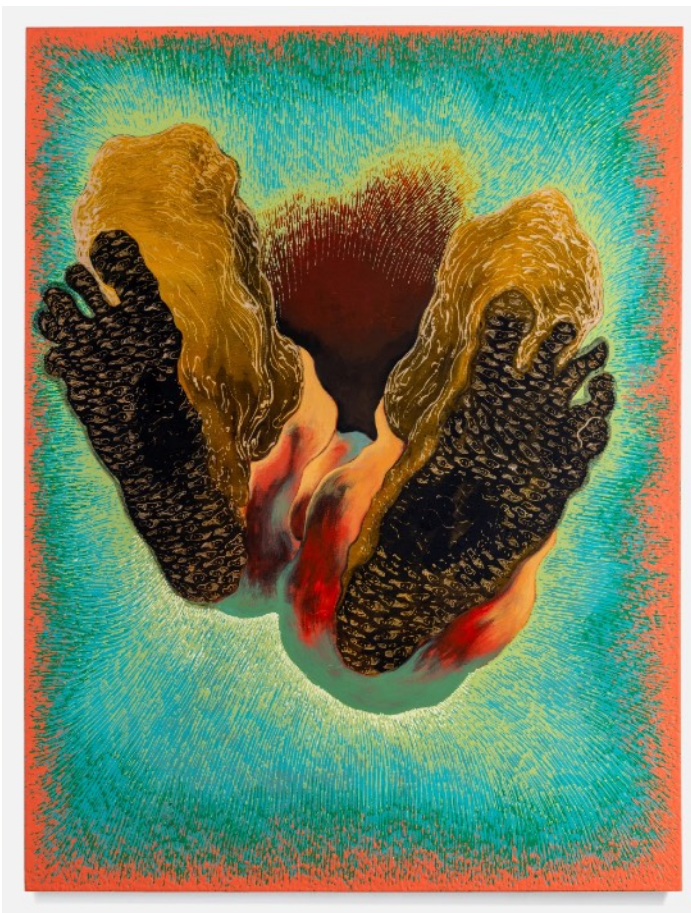
"Plonje (Dive)," 2023



"Cave," 2023



"Dezabiye: a Burning Glare Withheld," 2023



"Free Fall," 2023

Credits

All paintings courtesy of James Fuentes LLC.

CULTURED

ART

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.”

Devan Díaz

May 5, 2023



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."



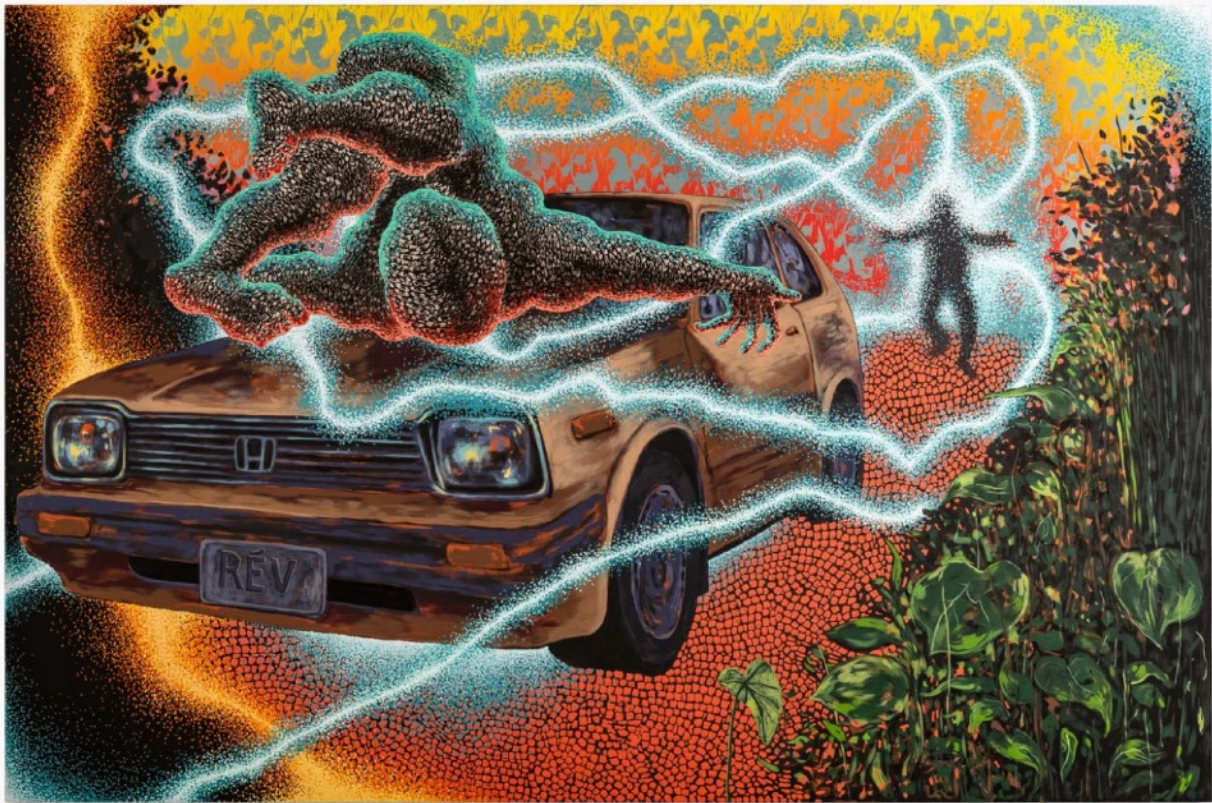
The title came to William after his exhibition at the Museum Of Contemporary Art North Miami, the largest survey of the artist's work thus far. The museum is 10 minutes from William's parents' home and two doors up from the dollar store that employed him in high school. Coming out of the MOCA North Miami 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.



Didier William, *Plonje (Dive)*, 2023.

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.



Didier William, *My Father's Nightmares: 40mph*, 2023.

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."

"Things Like This Don't Happen Here" will be on view from May 6 through June 17, 2023 at James Fuentes in Los Angeles.

Art Fairs

The Class of 2022: Meet 6 Fast-Rising Artists Having Star Turns at This Year's Art Basel Miami Beach

From an Ivorian-American who works with paper towels to a post-internet artist getting a posthumous spotlight, here's who to watch.

Artnet News, November 29, 2022



Didier William. Photo by Ryan Collerd, courtesy of the Pew Center for Arts and Heritage

Ready or not, [Art Basel Miami Beach](#) is upon us and the 20th anniversary edition of the fair in the U.S. promises to be filled with star-studded events, as well as plenty of ascendent talent to scout.

At this year's Miami art week, there are plenty of artists who deserve your attention, but we narrowed it down to six upstarts whose careers we believe are primed to reach new heights. So whether you're in the throes of JOMO or already starting to feel the FOMO for Art Basel, here's a primer on the work you definitely can't miss out on.

Didier William (b. 1983)



Didier William, *Mosaic Pool, Miami* (2021). Courtesy of the collection of Reginald and Aliya Browne.

Who: Born in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, and raised in Miami, Didier William got his BFA at the Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore, followed by an MFA at the Yale School of Art in New Haven, Connecticut. His mixed media paintings feature a dizzying profusion of tiny dots and other markings. The artist layers this acrylic paint over dark-skinned figures, who, upon closer inspection, are made up of relief carvings on wood panel of hundreds upon hundreds of eyes.

Based in: Philadelphia

Notable Resume Lines: William's impressive exhibition history includes a solo show at the Figge Museum Art Museum in Davenport, Iowa, as well as group outings at institutions including the Bronx Museum, the Museum of Latin American Art, and the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art. He has also been an artist-in-residence at the Sharpe-Walentas Studio in Brooklyn, and received the Rosenthal Family Foundation Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, a Joan Mitchell Foundation grant, and a Pew Fellowship from the Pew Center for Arts and Heritage in Philadelphia.

Where to See It: The artist's largest solo show to date, "Didier William: Nou Kite Tout Sa Dèyè," is on view through April 16 at the Museum of Contemporary Art, North Miami. At Art Basel Miami Beach, William's work will appear alongside of that of Geoffrey Holder, Juanita McNeely, and Oscar yi Hou at the booth of James Fuentes, who represents the artist in New York. (In Los Angeles, William shows with M and B Gallery.)

What to Look Out for: William makes work that sits at the boundary of abstraction and figuration, delving into Afro-Caribbean history to retell stories of the Black diaspora through a potent mix of myth and memory. A common motif is the mango leaf, in a nod to Haiti's native tropical fruits. The MOCA North Miami show will feature 40 paintings as well as William's first monumental sculpture, a 12-foot-tall wooden form inspired by columns used in traditional Haitian religious rituals.

Prices: At the fair, William's work will top out at \$120,000.

Fun Fact: In addition to his thriving art career, William is also an educator. He is currently an assistant professor of expanded print at the Mason Gross School of the Arts at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey. Previous posts include stints at the Yale School of Art, Poughkeepsie's Vassar College, the University of Pennsylvania, SUNY Purchase, and Columbia University in New York.

Up Next: William is featured in the group show "Forecast Form: Art in the Caribbean Diaspora, 1990s–Today," which is at the MCA Chicago through April 23, 2023, and will travel to the ICA Boston from October 5, 2023, to February 24, 2024. He'll also inaugurate Fuentes's new Los Angeles gallery next year.

—*Sarah Cascone*

[excerpted]

Didier William Is Using His Art to Offer Black, Queer Immigrants Hope



BY FRANCESCA ATTON  November 29, 2022 1:52pm



Didier William: *Mosaic Pool, Miami*, 2021, acrylic, collage, ink, and wood carving on panel, 68 by 104 inches.
COURTESY MOCA NORTH MIAMI

The city of Miami is home to the largest Haitian population outside Haiti. Artist **Didier William**, who was born in Haiti, was raised in North Miami, making him one of many immigrants from the island to call it home. There, William picked up his Haitian mother's medications at a local Walgreens and worked at the dollar store down the street from the Museum of Contemporary Art North Miami.

That institution is now about to open William's largest exhibition to date, with more than 40 paintings, sculptures, drawings, and prints set to go on view on December 1. Titled "Nou Kite Tout Sa Dèyè" ("We've Left That All Behind" in Haitian Creole), the exhibition is notably *not* a homecoming, according to William, who is now based in Philadelphia.

“The irony of the exhibition title is that you can never leave it all behind. It follows you and is sort of imprinted onto you,” William said in an interview, adding, “It points to something that is a reality for all of us who move from one place, especially from one country, to another—that your cultural DNA stays with you.”

Referencing both William’s immigrant experience and the physical journey he took to get to the U.S., curator **Erica Moiah James** said, “The show is designed as a pathway,” one that offers “multiple points of entry” into William’s multimedia practice.

Beginning with new artist books in the lobby and moving to a documentary about William’s family history by Emmy-nominated filmmaker Marlon Johnson, the exhibition considers the notion of home. New paintings of the first two houses in which William remembers living in Miami are set in a dark, intimate space. Notably, however, these are not the first places William and his family lived in North Miami. The artist aimed to portray the homes as accurately as possible, yet he also added a surreal touch: the structures are shown nestled among a sea of limbs.

William’s works, which are often made in series, draw on his own memory. They weave in the 39-year-old artist’s own recollections about immigration and Haitian religion while also speaking to broader themes related to Black and queer communities. Questions of belonging, the negotiation of new spaces and identities, and perseverance in times of personal struggle are at the forefront.

With a background in printmaking, William used to collage onto the surface of his paintings; now, however, he often prints directly onto the canvas using a relief block. These printed patterns are intended to recall Haiti, which William and his family left in 1989. They are drawn from “our curtains, throw blankets, pillows, and bedsheets that my mom brought with us,” William said. Many of these objects were displayed around his childhood home in Miami.

“In the paintings, when [these patterns] show up, they appear as the material artifacts in the actual spaces themselves—as the architecture, as the walls, as the landscape, and as the furniture,” he explained. The patterns, he continued, “make up the literal ground that the narrative [of the piece] is sitting in.”

William describes his first two remembered homes in Miami as “containers” for life events—they were places to live while applying for citizenship, receptacles for items like cassette tapes sent from family back in Haiti, and sites to rest when sick—and the entangled bodies he depicts do not merely represent what happened to him. Instead, they conjure a mix of remembered events and perceived history.



Installation view of Didier William's 2022 exhibition “Nou Kite Tout Sa Dèyè” (“We’ve Left That All Behind”) at **MOCA North Miami**.
PHOTO MICHAEL R. LOPEZ. COURTESY MOCA NORTH MIAMI

A new 12-foot-tall sculpture takes the form of a *potomitan* (central pole), typically made from a tree trunk, that is an essential structural feature of the Haitian vodou *hounfour* (temple). In vodou, it is believed that, through the *potomitan*, *loa* (spirits) can descend through earth to contact the faithful.

Though William's *potomitan* doesn't touch the ground, the carved figures echo the writhing figures depicted throughout his paintings. As the sculpture hangs suspended between the earthly and spiritual realms, there exists the possibility—and perhaps even the hope—of transcendence.

As a Black, queer immigrant in the United States, a mid-career showing of William's oeuvre is perhaps as much a testament to perseverance as much as it is to occupying space—which has become all the more difficult in a country that has had its fair share of anti-Black violence as well as legislation that has disenfranchised immigrants and the LGBTQ+ community. William seemed to acknowledge this when he said, “This country has always grappled with immigrants and belonging from its inception. And I don't think that conversation will ever end.”

The museum has organized the show with an eye toward the city's own immigrant community. Some 250 prints by William will be to North Miami immigrants in the community—many of whom can't afford to purchase a William piece, according to James—during the course the show.

Those visiting the exhibition can expect to experience an overarching connection between the personal and historical—an “ecosystem of the ways in which immigrant identity is constructed, and also a meditation on the impossibility of making identity into a kind of rigid system,” William explained.

Ultimately, “everything is about life,” James says. “When people are struggling to stay above water, they're *just* above the surface.”



Didier William: *Ma Tante Toya*, 2017, ink, collage, and wood carving on panel, 64 by 50 inches.
COURTESY MOCA NORTH MIAMI

One way William has been able to accomplish that is by reclaiming well-known images that have gained a place in the canon and make them his own. Among them is Jacques-Louis David's *Death of Marat* (1793), which depicts a murdered revolutionary lying in a bathtub. In William's reimagining of it, titled *Ma Tante Toya* (2017), a female figure clad in a continuous pattern pulls herself out of the bathtub with a machete in hand. Her neck bends almost impossibly to the left, and she stares at the viewer with a menacing gaze. Unlike David's version, there is no doubt that William's figure is very much alive.

Even in William's reimagining of Jacques-Louis David's *Death of Marat*, "his figure is a resurrected female from the Haitian revolution," James continued. "She is carrying her machete. He has completely remade this entire work and its meaning in art history."

The New York Times

Art to See in South Florida This Winter

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



"Gwo Madame" (2020) by Dider William is in his retrospective at MOCA North Miami. Braiteh Foundation Collection



By [Hilarie M. Sheets](#)

Nov. 30, 2022 Updated 10:31 a.m. ET

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.

[excerpted]

FRIEZE

Shows to See in the US this January

From a survey of Deana Lawson to an international exhibition foregrounding US imperialism since 1945, here are the top shows to see across the US

BY FRIEZE IN EXHIBITION REVIEWS, US REVIEWS | 13 JAN 23

Didier William

MOCA North Miami

November 2, 2022 – April 16, 2023



Didier William, *Just Us Three*, 2021, acrylic, oil, wood carving on panel, 2.6 × 1.7 m. Courtesy: the artist and MOCA North Miami; photograph: Constance Mensh

Both the title and setting of Didier William's exhibition 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. — *Monica Uszerowicz*

[excerpted]

FINANCIAL TIMES

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 MARCH 5 2023



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

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.



Didier William in his studio © Ryan Collerd



'Six Hundred Twenty Nautical Miles' (2021) © Collection of Jonathan Sobel and Marcia Dunn

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 be 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.



'Just Us Three' (2021)

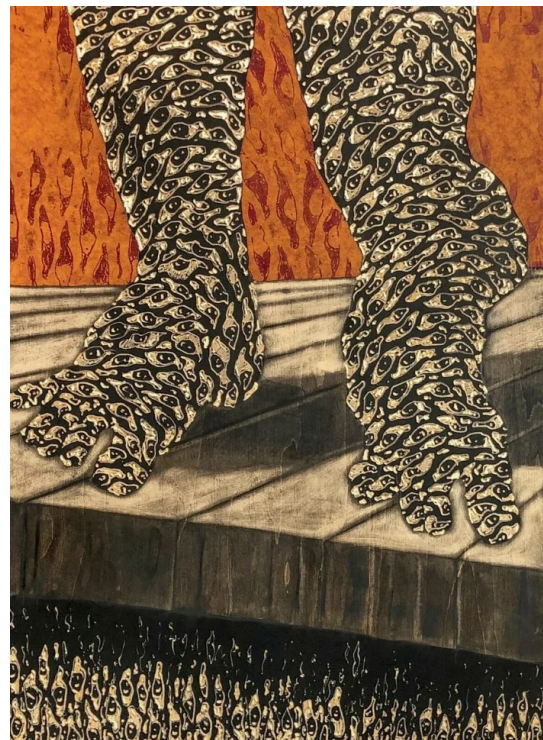
“Once the show had been confirmed, his feelings about Miami began to bubble up again,” says Moiah James. William says that he sees the homes as “sacred sites, architectural relics. I wanted to protect the integrity of those spaces because they protected me.” And yet, with a surreal twist, they are shown 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.”



'Dantor a Anais' (2018)



'Pye'm pa pou mwèn (My Feet Aren't Mine)' (2018)

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.

'Nou Kite Tout Sa Dèyè' is at MOCA until April 16. *'Things Like This Don't Happen Here'* is at James Fuentes, Los Angeles, March 25-May 13

ARTFORUM



Didier William, *Ma Tante Toya (My Aunty Toya)*, 2017, ink, collage, and wood carving on panel, 64 × 50".

Didier William

MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART, NORTH MIAMI

The title of Didier William's impressive solo exhibition here, "*Nou Kite Tout Sa Dèyè*," is Kreyòl, or Haitian Creole, for "We Have Left That All Behind"—fitting, as the artist's family relocated to North Miami from Haiti during the late 1980s. While William's genealogy and the name of the show evoke specific geographic locations, the "where" and "when" examined in the thirty-nine works on display—mixed-media paintings on wood panels, prints, artist books, and one sculpture—are never straightforward.

Mosaic Pool, Miami, 2021, is a case in point: The titular basin, surrounded by orange-brown tiles and brightly colored flora, is not an atypical scene for south Florida. However, the lush foliage could also be reminiscent of the Caribbean landscape William's family left behind. From afar, the dynamic and elaborately patterned forms emerging from the pool read as frolicking, miasmic bodies wearing bathing suits in bright green, orange, and blue. Indeed, the work was inspired by the artist's recent stay in one of Miami's high-rise luxury buildings, where he and his brothers had rented a room. Yet a text from William hung next to the image explains that he would not have had access to this kind of lavishness as a young person growing up in a working-class immigrant family.

As one gets closer to the picture, one clearly sees that the figures are composed of innumerable disembodied eyes that the artist meticulously and obsessively inscribed into the piece's wooden surface—carving plays a major role in a lot of William's work. The sheer number of irregular and wavy black outlines delineating the eyes elicits a powerfully unsettling feeling. Moreover, the subjects' clothing is rendered over the eyes via colorful hatching, intensifying the painting's overall vertiginous effect. William began incorporating the motif shortly after the 2012 murder of teenager Trayvon Martin, who lived in Sanford, Florida. Perhaps the eyes are meant to shield the bodies from an omnipresent and oppressive white gaze, offering a form of protection that surveils the surveillant.

Also included here are a group of paintings that transform more art-historical works. One powerful example is *Ma Tante Toya (My Aunty Toya)*, 2017, which riffs on Jacques-Louis David's 1793 canvas *Death of Marat*. In William's piece, the subject of David's work is replaced by a woman emerging from a bathtub. The vibratory aspect of the image caused by the surfeit of eyes suggests that the enigmatic figure depicted is vividly alive. Her head is impossibly tilted and parallel to her outstretched arm, which holds a machete. Used in sugarcane farming, the

massive blade is also a potent signifier of Haiti's eventual disentanglement from French colonial rule (under France, the nation was known as Saint-Dom-ingue). William's intent is to subversively supplant the revolutionary figure of Marat with one that references the world's only successful slave revolt.

One gallery in the show, dimly lit, is covered with custom-made textured wallpaper printed with countless eyes. However, their sclerae are a slightly different shade of black than their outlines, which makes them largely invisible. Once again, this type of camouflaging further underscores the artist's interest in anti-legibility, or a kind of Glissantian opacity.

It is worth noting that William is queer, but his art is closer in spirit to the word's use as a verb rather than a noun. The artist's works destabilize, rather than reinforce, a singular identity and function in the interstices between race, sexuality, and nationality as both objects of fantastical narrative and documents of Black life.

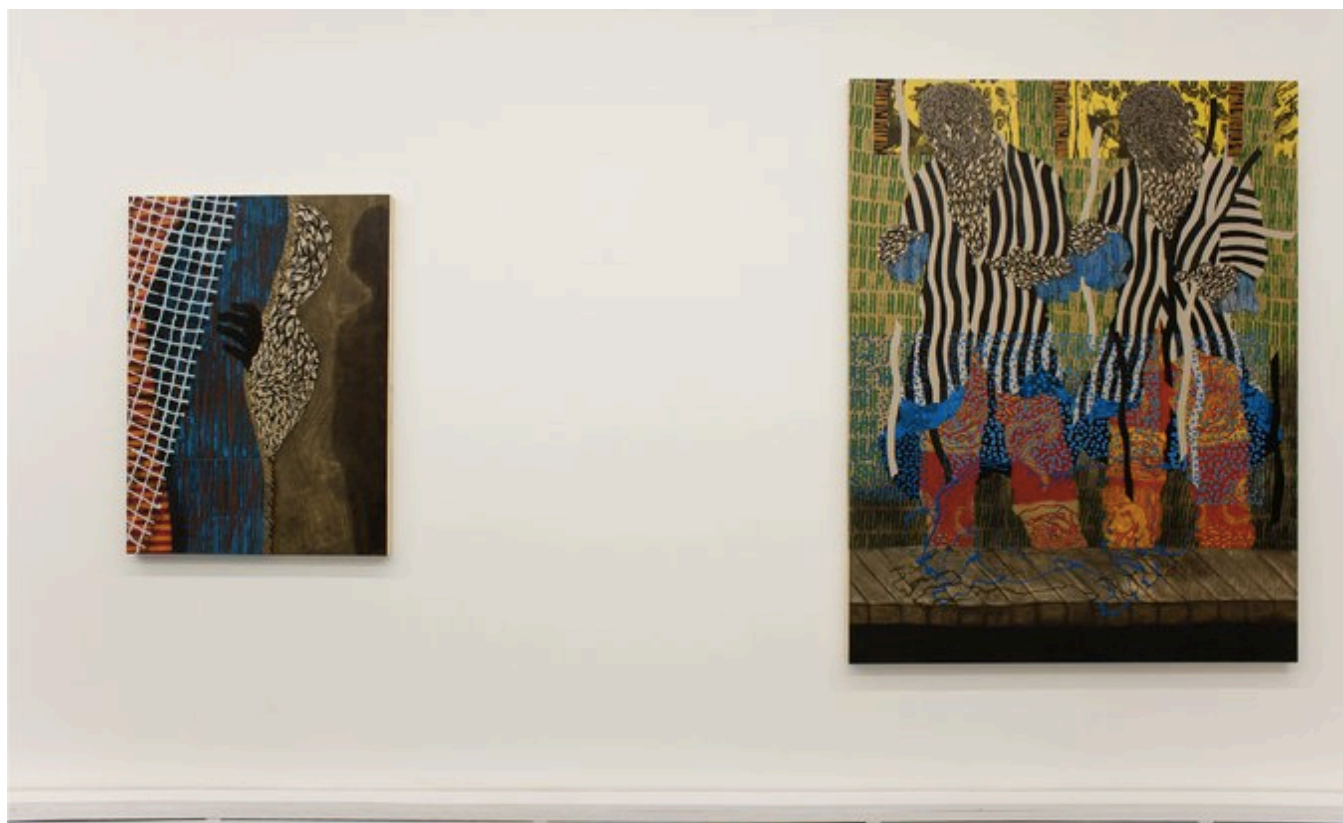
— *Alpesh Kantilal Patel*

The New York Times

What to See in New York Art Galleries This Week

Didier William

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



Didier William's multifaceted collages "Peel Back Every Layer," left, and "Two Dads." Credit Tiger Strikes Asteroid

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.

WILL HEINRICH