

## A Soaring Visionary of Afrofuturism and Black Power

Edward M. Gómez

ATLANTA — “Visionary” is a term that has become somewhat overused in the outsider art field — and over on the contemporary-art side of the broader art market, too.

In some ways, “visionary,” which is properly used to describe distinct or novel worldviews, as well as the sometimes bizarre imaginings of both self-taught and academically trained artists, has become, thanks to hyperbole-spewing publicists and dealers, as meaningless as “amazing,” “epic,” or “awesome” — a mere banality assigned to everything from bad pop songs to hamburgers.

The current exhibition *The Life and Death of Charles Williams*, however, illuminates an unusual and varied body of work that is nothing if not genuinely, emblematically visionary. Scheduled to remain on display at the Atlanta Contemporary through April 19, this comprehensive survey of Williams’ creations, curated by Phillip March Jones, is now viewable online in the form of a virtual exhibition tour while the art center is temporarily closed in response to the current virus outbreak.

Unlike the work of such African American autodidacts from the Deep South as Lonnie Holley, Thornton Dial, Sr., or the self-styled “prophet,” Royal Robertson, the art and ideas of Charles Williams, who was born in the poor, coal-mining region of southeastern Kentucky in 1942, have never received significant critical attention. Williams’ life, which was hardscrabble from the start, ended in 1998 as a result of AIDS-related illnesses; worse, the impoverished artist also starved to death.



Melissa Watt, undated photo of the artist Charles Williams (all images courtesy Atlanta Contemporary)



Life-size, undated photo of part of Charles Williams’ yard at his home in Lexington, Kentucky, along with mixed-media works made by the artist

Although a summary of his life and career, along with the transcription of informative autobiographical recollections by Williams, appeared in *Souls Grown Deep: African American Vernacular Art of the South* (Tinwood Books, 2000, 2001), a two-volume encyclopedia produced by William S. Arnett and his collaborators, it is only now, with the exhibition Jones has assembled at the Atlanta Contemporary, that the full scope of his art-making has come to light.

The exhibition features more than 100 objects, including mixed-media sculptures, paintings, and text-and-image comics. To assemble the exhibition, Jones combed through the holdings of Arnett's own personal collection and those of the Kentucky Folk Art Center at Morehead State University in Morehead, among other sources.



Charles Williams, "Fantasy Automobile" (circa 1980s), mixed media, dimensions variable

"You don't have to look too closely to see that many of Williams' themes are surprisingly timely and relevant today," Jones told me during a recent visit to the exhibition, prior to the art center's temporary closing. Jones, the founder of Institute 193, an arts center in Lexington, Kentucky, previously served as the first director of the Souls Grown Deep Foundation, an organization Arnett set up to preserve and promote the works of mostly black artists from the Deep South, which he had begun acquiring in the 1980s.

When Williams was a child, he moved with his mother and a great-uncle to Chicago. Later, he returned to Kentucky, where, in the mid-1960s, he enrolled in the Job Corps, an education and vocational-training program sponsored by the U.S. Department of Labor.

At its camp in northwestern Kentucky, he fared well, later recalling in his autobiographical statement in *Souls Grown Deep*, "I did artwork, photography, interviews, and sometimes was a paste-up artist for the camp paper." For that publication, Williams created an original comic strip, *J.C. of the Job Corps*, which recounted the adventures of teenage participants in the program. Jones has rounded up a batch of these strips from 1965.

Later, although Williams dreamed of landing a factory job, as he also noted in his published recollections, he "ended up in the cleaning service of IBM in Lexington," where, in time, he began making large, painted-wood cutout figures of comic-book superheroes, which he displayed in the yard of his home. (The Atlanta show opens with a life-size photograph of part of the artist's yard, to which a few of his painted assemblages have been affixed, providing a vivid sense of scale and evoking their original setting.)

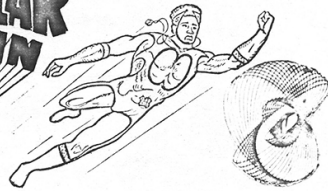
Williams also wrote and illustrated other strips featuring such original characters as the Amazing Spectacular Captain Soul Superstar, Black Son, and Captain Thirteen. Through simple, black-and-white line drawings, their stories considered such themes as women's liberation, racism and Black Power, and environmentalism.

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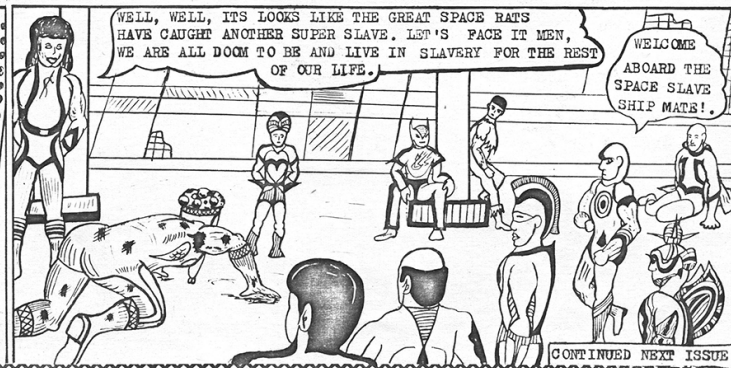
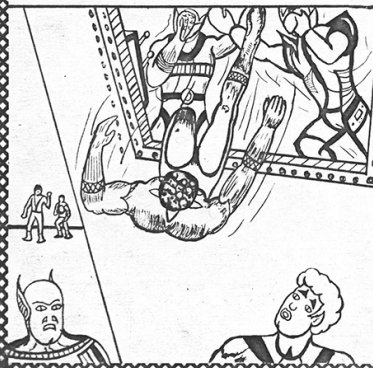
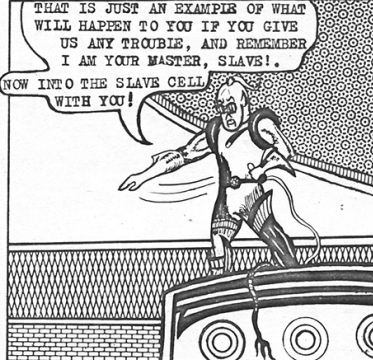
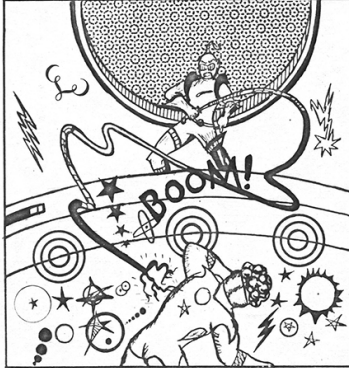
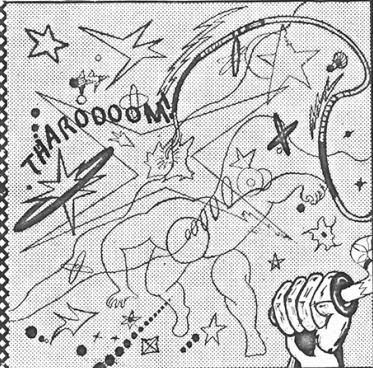
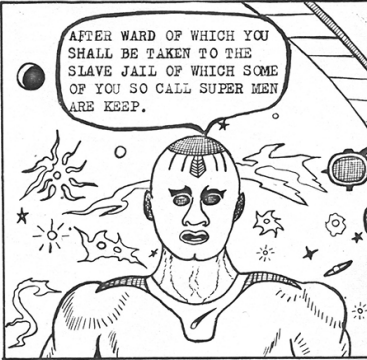
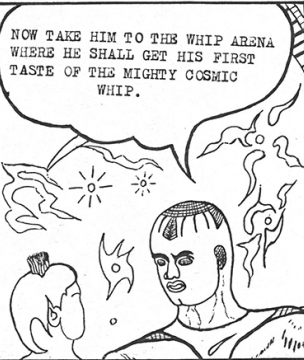
#4



CAPTIVES  
OF THE  
COSMIC  
MAYFLOWER  
CHAPTER 4

THE SLAVE AND THE WHIP

STORY & ART BY C.W. ©



CONTINUED NEXT ISSUE.

Charles Williams, page from "Captain Soul" (ca. 1970s), digital scan of printed sheet, variable dimensions

In Captain Soul's *Captives of the Cosmic Mayflower* series, Williams set his tale in a timeless future, looking back to look ahead and address the themes of slavery and racism in the broader cosmos. "Slavery eh. Sound like something I better check into," Captain Soul observes in one strip, both inquisitively and ironically.

Elsewhere, in the *Cosmic Giggles* series, Martians visiting Earth decide not to establish a terrestrial colony, given all the racist attitudes, sexism, damage to the natural environment, and intractable social problems human beings have whipped up for themselves.



Charles Williams, pencil holders, circa 1980s and later, mixed media, dimensions variable

Also in the Captain Soul strip, as Jones points out in the exhibition's accompanying notes, Williams depicts "burning crosses, a swastika, a bottle-shaped container of tuberculosis, and other symbols of man's moral failings."

The curator writes that Williams' deeply humanistic superhero from another time and place may be appreciated within the context of Afrofuturism, a roots-based, aesthetic, and philosophical forward-looking take on the melding of African culture and technology, which was exuberantly expressed, for example, through the music and performances of the late experimental jazz composer Sun Ra (1914-1993), whose stage costumes sometimes combined pharaonic robes with sci-fi gear.

Jones observes that Captain Soul ambitiously attacks such cosmos-wide problems as "the intergalactic slave trade, space-gang violence, and artificial intelligence." Williams created and empowered a rare black superhero who, Jones adds, "defeats his enemies with strength, cunning, and style." Before leaping into action, Captain Soul often declares, "It's Soul Time! Black Power!"

Williams' comics are a generally unfamiliar element of his wider body of work, which is better known for mixed-media assemblages made from a variety of found, repurposed materials.

Among them are hundreds of oddly shaped pencil holders created from scraps of wood or, later, bits of melted plastic that fell from the machinery at the IBM plant where he worked. Filled with pencils, ballpoint pens, and felt-tip markers, painted in bright colors, and decorated with light bulbs, mirrors, feathers, or tiny American flags, they are displayed together on a large table in the exhibition, their contents emphasizing their function as sculptures whose shapes allude to futuristic vehicles.

Art historian Paul Arnett, William S. Arnett's son and past collaborator in the preservation and documenting of the artworks his father collected, has written that Williams' pencil holders may be seen as "holsters or silos" for "dangerous and liberating implements" — writing utensils that are both the tools and symbols of literacy and self-expression, which the Old South's white-supremacist power structure denied its enslaved subjects and their descendants.

Williams produced larger mixed-media works, too, including several sculptures that, Jones suggests, resemble spaceships. He also made electric lamps and a one-person vehicle — a desk chair on wheels topped by a dome-shaped garbage-can lid and trailed by a small parade of assemblage pieces that collectively suggest the form of a larger craft.

The dates and titles of many of Williams' works remain unknown; at some point he produced a series of paintings of tropical birds on Masonite or hard, insulation foam, as well as paintings on board of Dick Tracy, Superman, and other popular comic-strip characters.

As a boy, Williams, who described his birthplace, Blue Diamond, Kentucky, as a "little old country hick town in coal-mining territory," regularly visited its segregated movie theater. "Fifteen cents would get you into the movie, and there was always a cartoon," he told *Souls Grown Deep's* authors, noting that he enjoyed seeing big-screen images of "Tarzan, Batman and Robin, Jungle Jim, and Westerns with Lash LaRue, Cisco Kid, [the] Lone Ranger, [and] Red Ryder." He added, "Captain Marvel and Superman was the top dogs for me. They could fly."

As the current exhibition makes clear, Williams's imagination continued to soar even as his health failed, and death approached. Jones managed to round up four of the artist's rare, late works, whose peculiar air of elegy and pathos seeps out from an unlikely material — hardened black tar, which brings to mind the plastic goop of the earlier pencil holders.

In these enigmatic assemblages, Williams packed into the tar's once-malleable, all-devouring goo (neatly contained within old castoff frames) a trove of trash-turned-treasure — circuit boards, a spray-painted pinwheel, plastic bottle caps, transparent tubes filled with oil, a cork coaster, a pocket calculator, a bicycle reflector, and empty bottles of cheap, American-made Tvarscki vodka.

Had these works been made a century ago, the Surrealists would have swooned; today, postmodern appropriationists may find in them a playful-subversive kind of "recontextualization."

*The Life and Death of Charles Williams* rescues from near-obscurity an unlikely artist whose multifaceted oeuvre remains as intriguing as it is deeply personal. By bringing together the hitherto scattered, disparate puzzle pieces of Williams' life and career, Jones' efforts offer, in their own right, a visionary appreciation of a most imaginative autodidact.



Charles Williams, untitled assemblage work (late 1990s), mixed media, dimensions variable