

# Atlanta Contemporary Displays Works Of Charles Williams, An Artist With Many Styles

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In the sci-fi comics of self-taught artist Charles Williams, heroes fight against an intergalactic slave trade. And when aliens observe the racism and economic inequality on Earth, they decide to return to their planet.

Williams also filled his yard with his cosmic creations made from objects he found.

There's an exhibition of his works titled "The Life and Death of Charles Williams" on view now at the Atlanta Contemporary.



"City Lights" senior producer Claire Reynolds discussed the exhibition with Atlanta Contemporary executive director Veronica Kessenich and curator Phillip March Jones. Jones began the conversation with how he rediscovered the artist.

"Untitled (Pencil Holder)" by Charles Williams is shown. An exhibition of his works is on view at Atlanta Contemporary through April 19. CREDIT CHARLES WILLIAMS

The "Life and Death of Charles Williams" is on view at the Atlanta Contemporary through April 19.

## Interview Transcript

**Phillip March Jones:** Charles Williams was born in 1942 in Blue Diamond, Kentucky, which was a coal mining town that no longer exists in the same form that it once did. But he lived the majority of his life in Lexington, Kentucky, where I also grew up, and worked in the cleaning services of IBM — a factory producing computers there locally. So I discovered Charlie's work when I was working here in Atlanta, many years ago, at the Souls Grown Deep Foundation. And there were a few painted trees and pencil holders, and I asked the collector Bill Arnett what they were, where they were from, etc., and he explained that this was an artist from Lexington, Kentucky, and I remembered having driven by his hours when I was a kid and seeing the painted trees, etc. in the yard. So it started this sort of fascination with him and his work.

**Claire Reynolds:** You have about a hundred works on view at the Atlanta Contemporary, right, in this first-ever solo show by Charles Williams. Will the comic strips be included in the exhibition?

**PMJ:** So, yeah, there are quite a few. Actually, he did a few different series. One was called *J.C. of the Job Corps*. So he was a member of the Job Corps in the mid-1960s, from about 1964 through

'67. And so he did the back page of the camp newspaper which was called the *Breckinridge Bugle*, and then later developed a series called *Captain Soul Superstar* which is — Captain Soul goes and he fights basically the intergalactic slave trade using a lot of kind of traditional American history references but, again, in space. And the third major body of comics is called the *Cosmic Giggles*, and so he made those beginning around 1975, we presume, because he mentions the bicentennial, which is something people aren't very interested in, you know, beyond 1976. But it's the story of all these Martians that come from outer space, they come to Earth, they realize there's racism, pollution, all kinds of other societal ills, and they leave.

**CR:** Right, also I read that they also leave because the rent is too high?

**PMJ:** Yeah, the rent's going up and the gas prices are too high, yeah. I mean it's all sort of like today.

**CR:** What is the significance of having this first-ever solo show for Charles Williams here in Atlanta?

**Veronica Kessenich:** I think it's important for us as an organization to support emerging and established artists that may be veritably under recognized and unknown and when Phillip presented this as an idea, it seemed like the appropriate time and place and space to mount an exhibition of this caliber and magnitude. Especially because so many of the works have kind of been reunited. There's six different lending institutions that have come together to support this exhibition and it's just really incredibly with free admission and with our audience to be able to have, you know, something that's unique and exciting and generous and open to be shared with our audience. So I think just the time was right and it's a beautiful exhibition, and the experience of walking through and being able to see everything, to be able to see Charles's home — there's a large wall mural — and there's works in front of it. So it's almost like you're stepping into his environment and kind of getting acclimated with what he's trying to do.

**CR:** Yeah, because he decorated his whole yard when he was living in a duplex. I read that he had an environmental art installation like many artists do, but his neighbor who was a mechanic started hanging tires and things from the trees, so he just sort of gave it up.

**PMJ:** Charles had a yard show that expressed certain ideas not only to his immediate community but to a larger sort of community in and around. He painted the trees and the leaves on the trees and he had his *Pencil Rocket* sculpture on the front porch, and he had cutouts of Batman and Mighty Mouse and Superman, etc., hanging, again, from those trees. But he mentions that his neighbor sort of saw what Charles was doing and then took automobile parts because he was a mechanic and started hanging them in the trees. But of course, Charles had a real sensibility, and a style, and a reason for doing what he was doing, and I think was sort of like, "Okay. I'm not going to do this anymore, I'm not going to encourage this guy."

**CR:** He was a great storyteller with his comics and I'm assuming as well with his artwork. Can you talk a bit about some of the themes in his work?

**PMJ:** Well I think the most significant contribution or idea, really, that Charles had was related to the pencil. So, the idea of like, the pen...cil is mightier than the sword. And I think that's really embodied, of course, by the *Pencil Rocket*, which is this sculpture made sort of like a whirligig in the form of a fan that could rotate on his front porch but then shot this rocket in the form of a pencil into space, into the cosmos. But you know, as a young man, obviously he's drawing comics and comic strips, etc. using a pencil but later in life when he's working at IBM, he makes pencil holders and he makes hundreds of these over the course of his lifetime, beginning about in 1983, and the pencil holders end

up being these sort of vessels, or holsters, or containers for this really amazing instrument. Which is the pencil, which is of course the symbol for advancement, organization, betterment, education, literacy, etc. So I think his real contribution is that. And all the language in and around that, which probably constitutes about half the show. Things that are immediately related to literacy, to writing, to education, and things that he didn't really have access to. He didn't graduate high school. He's from a very, very, very rural coal mining town. This is in the 1950s, he was born in '42, so in the '40s and '50s — this is somebody who didn't really ever reap the benefits of a formal education but who understood very clearly the power and the potential of it. And so I think, really, used that to great effect in his art.

**CR:** This exhibition is called *The Life and Death of Charles Williams*?

**PMJ:** Correct.

**CR:** His death is significant and has had an impact on people who are alive today. Can you talk about “the life and death of Charles Williams”?

**PMJ:** Yeah, so in 1998, shortly after he passed away, a gentleman in Lexington, Kentucky founded an organization called Moveable Feast Lexington, which delivers hot and nutritious meals to people living with HIV and AIDS, and their dependent children or caretakers. And what I thought was so important about that was that Charlie, in death, was finally able to perversely sort of fulfill a lot of the societal wishes and ideas that he had. But again, only after death — his death being an example of a societal failure. You know, Charlie died of AIDS-related complications but he really starved to death. We've used this exhibition as an opportunity to take money from the sale of some socks and pencils, and also donations to the Atlanta Contemporary for admission, and then we're going to be making donations to that organization so that very tangibly, Charlie can support an organization that was not only founded in his honor or memory, but that he would have likely supported or advocated for during his lifetime.

**CR:** Right, and Moveable Feast is bringing hot meals to people with HIV but also their caregivers as well, right?

**PMJ:** Correct.

**CR:** What do you suggest that people who are coming to see the show *The Life and Death of Charles Williams* — how should they enter that space, what would be a good thing to keep in mind or to look for?

**PMJ:** Well, what we've tried to do from the beginning of the show — we've stationed his *Pencil Rocket* right at the entrance, kind of like, shooting you into the cosmos and into Charlie's world. Which includes again a representation, almost larger-than-life, of his yard and environment. I would encourage people just to approach it with a very open mind. I mean, Charlie's aesthetic is not conventional by any means. We've provided some wall labels and text, etc., many of which are quotes by Charlie directly so you can hear him speaking about his own work in his own voice. Yeah, I would encourage people to approach it not only with an open mind but to think about, sort of the time and space he was living in and the time and space in which we are currently living in. And perhaps realize that certain things have not changed despite the passage of time, and then sort of think about what we can all do collectively to change that.

**VK:** As Phillip says, we're not done with the narrative that he's begun and I think it needs multiple visits.