

Hard-Hitting Humour

Edward M. Gómez

In Atlanta, an exhibition surveys the art and ideas of the late Charles Williams, an African American self-taught artist with a prescient view of US society.

The Kentucky-born self-taught artist Charles Williams (1942–1998) has never received the same kind of attention that other African American autodidacts from the American South such as Thornton Dial, Lonnie Holley, or the quiltmakers of Gee’s Bend, Alabama, have enjoyed. Now, though, an exhibition at the Atlanta Contemporary in Atlanta, Georgia, is offering a first- ever, comprehensive look at his creations in various media and the social-political outlook that informed them. Curated by Phillip March Jones, the founder of Institute 193, an arts centre in Lexington, Kentucky, “The Life and Death of Charles Williams” features more than 100 art objects, along with archival photographs. It will remain on view through April 19, 2020.



Pencil Holder, c. 1997, mixed media, 14 x 12 x 9 in. / 35 x 30 x 23 cm, Kentucky Folk Art Center, Morehead State University

Jones recalls that an autobiographical statement by Williams appeared in *Souls Grown Deep: African American Vernacular Art of the South* (Tinwood Books), an encyclopedic, two-volume work produced by the Atlanta-based researcher and art collector William S. Arnett and other collaborators that was published in 2000 and 2001. It is still regarded as the definitive reference resource in its field.

Beginning in the 1980s, Arnett travelled around the rural American South, meeting self-taught artists of African or mixed racial and ethnic ancestry, most of whom had grown up in financially underprivileged circumstances. Routinely subjected to institutionalised racism, they had received little formal education.

Jones says, “Actually, it was Bill Arnett’s brother, Robert, who acquired some of Williams’ works for Bill and documented aspects of the artist’s life, because Williams’ home was located beyond Bill’s usual driving routes around Birmingham, Alabama.” A few years ago, Jones served as the first director of the Atlanta-based Souls Grown Deep Foundation, a repository of and research archive related to the works William S. Arnett had amassed. (He also assembled a personal collection of artworks produced by black self-taught artists of the American South.) “The works that Charles Williams sold to Robert Arnett were, as far as I know, the only sales of his art that he ever made in his lifetime”, Jones observes.



Fantasy Automobile, early 1980s, mixed media, 51.5 x 38 x 43 in. / 130 x 97 x 109 cm, Souls Grown Deep Foundation

Examining such themes as women's liberation, racism and black power, and environmentalism, Williams wrote and illustrated his own comics and created original characters: the Amazing Spectacular Captain Soul Superstar, Black Son, and J.C. of the Job Corps. In his *Cosmic Giggles* series, Martians visiting Earth decide not to establish a terrestrial colony, given all the racism, sexism, environmental pollution and social problems human beings had managed to cook up.

To assemble the current exhibition, among other sources, Jones combed through the holdings of the William S. Arnett Collection and those of the Kentucky Folk Art Center in Morehead, Kentucky. To gain a sense of how Williams' work has been appreciated by the still rather limited audience it has attracted through a couple of earlier, smaller exhibitions, he interviewed such Kentucky-based contemporary artists as Robert Morgan and the late Louis Zoellar Bickett, who spoke of having been inspired by their self-taught counterpart's inventive use of found materials and by his social-political awareness. Williams died in 1998 of AIDS-related ailments – and starvation.

Williams was born in a tiny town in the coal-mining region of southeastern Kentucky; when he was a child, he moved with his mother and a great-uncle to Chicago. Later, as a young man, Williams moved back to Kentucky, where, in the mid-1960s, he enrolled in the Job Corps, a government-sponsored training programme. Although he sought a factory job, as Williams noted in *Souls Grown Deep*, he "ended up in the cleaning service of IBM in Lexington", Kentucky's second-largest city.

In time, Williams began making large, painted-wood cutout figures of comic-book superheroes, which he displayed in the yard of his home. He produced mixed-media assemblages, including a one-person vehicle, and numerous, sculptural pencil holders, some of which resemble familiar objects. (One of them cleverly takes the shape of a missile poised for launch.)



Untitled, 1980s, mixed media 22 x 20 x 11 in. / 59 x 56 x 28 cm, The Arnett Collection

Jones notes, “Williams’ works were ahead of their time. Preceded only by the experimental jazz musician Sun Ra and a handful of other black artists, he was an Afrofuturist long before mainstream culture became aware of that outlook. Had his work been created right now, this year, it would still feel fresh – and relevant.”

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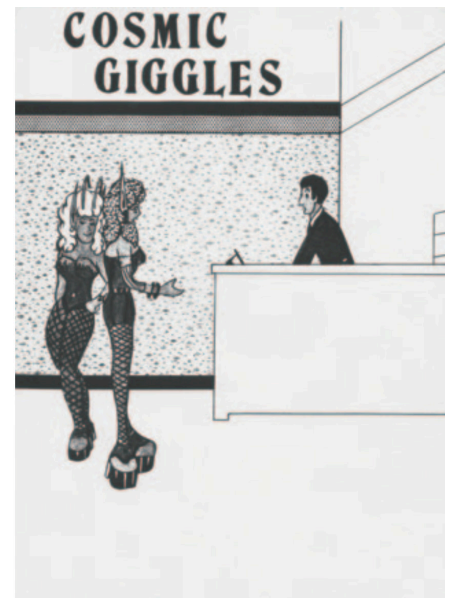
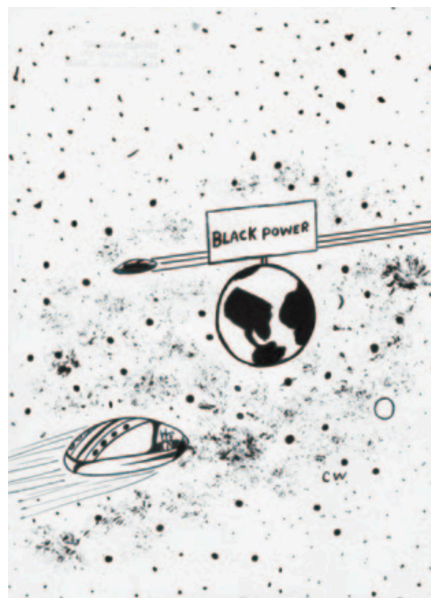
“The Life and Death of Charles Williams” is on view at the Atlanta Contemporary, Georgia, through April 19, 2020 (www.atlantaccontemporary.org).

Edward M. Gómez is Raw Vision’s senior editor.



Pencil Rocket, early 1980s, papier-mâché, plastic fan blade, table-fan base, plastic, doorstop and paint, 24 x 59 x 19 in. / 60 x 150 x 48 cm, High Museum of Art, purchase and gift of the Souls Grown Deep Foundation, from the William S. Arnett Collection

All photos courtesy of Atlanta Contemporary, Atlanta, Georgia



left to right: *Captain Soul*, early 1970s, graphite on paper with collage; *Untitled (Black Power, from Cosmic Giggles)*, c. 1975, graphite and ink on paper; *Untitled (cover illustration, Cosmic Giggles)*, circa 1975, graphite and ink on paper; each sheet, 11 x 8.5 in. / 28 x 22 cm; all works in the Collection of the Kentucky Folk Art Center, Morehead State University