LEXINGTON HERALD-LEADER

October 24, 2010

In Death, Lexington Artist Gets Break That Life Never Offered

Shannon Eblen

Everyone loves a good underdog story. Small-town boy works hard, follows his passion and becomes successful. Charles Williams didn't get to be that guy.

As a poor African-American from an Eastern Kentucky coal town, he faced many setbacks on his road of advancement. And despite his best efforts, his life ended in obscurity.

But now, because of *Charles Williams: Silo #3*, a joint exhibition at Land of Tomorrow Gallery and Institute 193 in Lexington, his legacy as an artist can be recognized.

"The idea for the show was a sort of a homecoming," said Phillip March Jones, curator of *Silo #3* and founder of Institute 193.

The work spans many years, beginning with the newspaper comics that Williams drew in his youth, and ending with the bleak tar paintings of his final days before dying of complications from AIDS in 1998. He was 55.

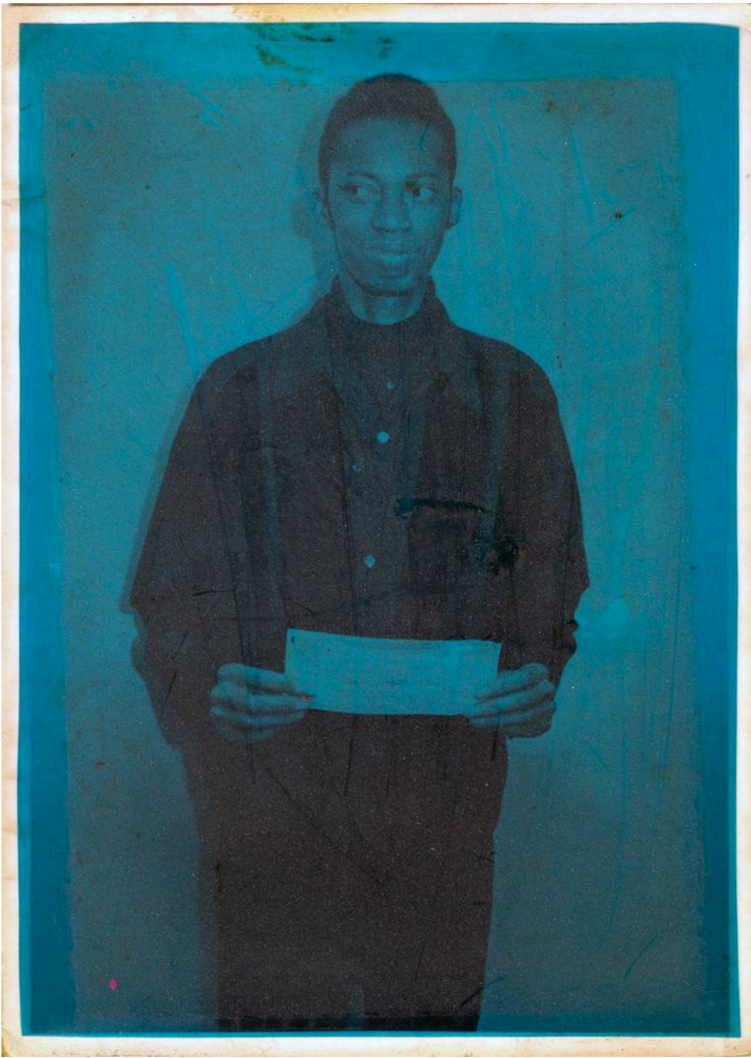
"It's supposed to be a celebration but also calls up these questions, that we let this talented person go and die," Jones said.

Williams grew up in Blue Diamond, near Hazard. The local movie theater was where Williams found his first inspiration, teaching himself to draw his cartoon heroes Dick Tracy, Batman, Superman and Captain Marvel.

For a few years, he lived with his mother in Chicago. He always meant to return to Chicago but said he kept getting "pinned" in Kentucky, Williams once wrote.

He joined the Breckinridge Job Corps, where he began drawing for the camp newspaper. Copies of his comics, *JC of the Job Corps* and *The Amazing Spectacular Captain Soul*, hang at Land of Tomorrow Gallery.

Charles Williams' paintings of comic-book figures and works made of found objects are on display at Land of Tomorrow Gallery.



Charles Williams, seen in an undated photo, was an Eastern Kentucky native.

After the Job Corps, where he had been trained in art and mechanics, he worked as a janitor at IBM in Lexington, a position that played an important and ironic role in his artistic career.

Williams started collecting the piles of extruded plastic from the machines that made typewriter cases. He drilled holes into them and stuffed them with pencils to create otherworldly pencil holders that he unsuccessfully tried to peddle to IBM workers.

Artist Robert Morgan of Lexington was a longtime friend. He recalls visiting Williams' house once and seeing a couple of three-drawer file cabinets "filled to the brim with every kind of pencil and pen, that he would just steal from the desks at IBM."

Williams produced 175 pencil holders. Many are gone, but some can be seen at Institute 193, grouped on a table the way they were in Williams' home.

The pencil was a symbol of status to Williams.

"Charlie wasn't making pencil holders for the boss man sitting at a desk," Morgan said. "He was making them for his desk."

The colors in his pencil holders are reminiscent of those in his sculptures, made from vibrantly painted found objects including a mousetrap, a rearview mirror and faces cut from a Rolling Stones album cover.

The house on Short Street where Williams lived echoed this eccentricity. He painted all of the trees in his yard and put his paintings of his comic heroes in the trees. Sometimes he blared classical music through the speakers on his porch.

"I got me this place here and decided to do something with it, ... do something out front there that I hadn't heard of no other person doing," Williams once wrote.

Land of Tomorrow re- created this environment in the gallery space, complete with photos of the house and of Williams, taken by Lexington photographer Melissa LeBus Watt in 1993.

Watt, who was shooting for ACE Magazine, wanted Williams to be featured in the magazine.

"I'd been driving past his house for a while and I thought, 'Who is this and why don't I know about him?'" Watt said.

She approached him one day and found him eager to model. It was the only time she would ever meet him; she described him as a “fascinating guy.”

“He loved doing the pictures. He really enjoyed being the subject of it,” Watt said.

When Watt heard about *Silo #3*, she remembered the photo shoot with Williams and uncovered the negatives.

“You can tell he was showing off in those pictures; I love that,” she said.

The University of Kentucky got a taste of Williams’ colorful personality in 1976, when his friend, Arturo Sandoval, an art professor, talked Williams into taking Sandoval’s foundation sculpture course. Until then, Williams had focused primarily on his drawings.

“Once he was here in the environment,” Sandoval said, “he began to realize art could be any kind of material.”

Williams enjoyed the metal shop, experimenting with the tools and incorporating the scraps into his work.

Although the shapes, sizes and colors vary, all of the objects on the shelves are pencil holders made by Williams.

Morgan said, “He would show up crazy drunk with a bottle of whiskey. The kids were either scared to death of him or loved him. He might have only been there one year, but he made an impression at UK.”

Williams’ art wasn’t popular in Lexington, but it got noticed by a collector in Atlanta, William Arnett, who contributed much of the work included in *Silo #3*.

Arnett said he was “moved deeply” by Williams’ artwork and would often speak to him on the phone. But because they never met, it was only recently that Arnett learned of Williams’ death.

Williams’ art “wasn’t aimed at the art world, thank God,” Arnett said. “Charles did his own thing.”

Williams is included in the second volume of Arnett’s book *Souls Grown Deep: African American Vernacular Art of the South*. His brief autobiography is printed along with images of his work.

He also was a part of Arnett’s exhibit for the 1996 Atlanta Olympics, also called *Souls Grown Deep*. Williams attended the opening, where, Morgan said, he was “treated like a dignitary, then took the Greyhound bus back home.”

It was after this career high point that Williams’ health began to fail. While hospitalized for dehydration, he was diagnosed with AIDS.

Morgan and another friend, Michael Thompson, became Williams’ constant caregivers, making sure he ate by bringing him Lee’s Famous Recipe chicken, his favorite. But it wasn’t always easy to come by the food.

“We had no money to buy food,” Morgan said. He tried unsuccessfully to sell Williams’ pencil holders around town for $30 so he could feed his dying friend.

Dangerously thin and unable to walk, Williams spent the last 12 days of his life lying in his front yard, drinking and stirring a pot of tar. Sticking his empties and other remnants from his yard into the tar, he created his last works. Those can be seen at Institute 193.

Thompson, who also was living with AIDS and was bothered by Williams’ death, was inspired to create a food-delivery program, Moveable Feast, for people living with HIV and AIDS.

“I think it affects the HIV community a great deal,” said Terry Mullins, director of Moveable Feast. He said that most clients are uninsured and that “good nutrition will save the community.”

The first meal served by Moveable Feast was on Oct. 3, 1998, a few months after Williams’ death.

Thompson, who died in 2007, made sure Williams was remembered, while Morgan turned his attention to the art.

He begged Williams’ house key from a social worker and began to move all of the art out, one load at a time.

“It’s not big recognition, but it’s cool recognition,” Morgan said of the exhibit, “and Charlie would have loved being over there in the ‘hood.”