

# Local Exhibit Highlights Work of Self-Taught Southern Artist

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Enjoyment of self-taught art may depend on how much you want to swim around in another human being's headspace. Are you in the mood to contemplate the conditions that foster both creativity, but also the darker byways of obsession and personal experience?

With much art, it is possible to separate the maker from her work. You can glide across the pleasures of surface, technique and subject matter. But self-taught art gives you no such opportunity or out; part of the bargain is, in fact, a deep dive into biography. And in the Atlanta Contemporary show "The Life and Death of Charles Williams," there's no getting around the strange, fascinating and sometimes troubling reality of this Kentucky artist's life.

There is both joy and pain in Williams' experience, and in his art. It's hard not to revel in the unique point of view of this utterly idiosyncratic Black Southern artist while also feeling saddened by his circumstance and limitations. Like so many self-taught artists, Williams defiantly marched to his own arrhythmic beat. He spent a lifetime making art that acted out the kind of dramas of might and right that children cling to: art fueled by comic book tales of brawny, powerful, justice-minded superheroes with cut-glass jawlines, tree trunk thighs and hyper-articulated Tom of Finland musculature. In fact, Williams learned to draw, like so many kids, by rendering favorite heroes like Dick Tracy and Superman. But while kids eventually give up those superficial parables of good and evil, Williams clung to them.



"Pencil Holders," mixed media by Charles Williams. Courtesy of Atlanta Contemporary

As an adult, Williams invented superheroes of his own, contending with real-world demons. In crudely drawn cartoon panels reminiscent of Jack Chick religious tracts and displayed on the Contemporary walls, we meet Captain Soul Superstar, who battled agents of the intergalactic slave trade. Sci-fi fantasy collided with real-world history and demonstrated Williams' sincere desire for justice over the forces of racism.

Williams' most telling personal signature, evident throughout the show, was a love of outlandish, joyous color that extended from the embellished sculptures he crafted from wood and found objects and painted in a rainbow of primary colors, to his personal space. Williams transformed his immediate world to match his desire. He decorated his Blue Diamond, Kentucky front yard with brightly painted trees and plastic flowers, a Technicolor expression of how he'd like the world to look visible in the Contemporary's oversized photographic mural of his home. A row of his embellished painted tree stumps greets you at the entrance to the show, little stubby messengers from Williams' World.



"Untitled (Tree)" mixed media, by Charles Williams. Courtesy of Atlanta Contemporary

On one hand, Williams was a man without power or station. He lived in an impoverished sliver of Kentucky, yearned to do factory work but instead ended up a janitor at IBM. But his work often expressed extremes of power and purpose.



Williams was also committed to a kind of hyper inventive practicality, as seen in the dozens of "Pencil Holders" that command a long white table in one gallery. Shrines to markers and highlighters and No. 2 pencils, these pedestals painted in Williams' typical intense color scheme are like parade floats for these ordinary work tools. They suggest a reverence for what those pencils and pens can create — an elevation of their station.

It is not until Williams is dying that color leaves him. A series of works using found objects like liquor bottles and computer circuitry and fat, buttery slabs of black tar plunge you into the sense of despair Williams must have felt when he made them. He died in 1998 of HIV/AIDS, so poor that he essentially starved to death, a tragic end to a life remembered for its creativity and invention.



"Spectacular Captain Soul: Captives of the Cosmic Mayflower, Chapter 1 and 2" (1973) mixed media by Charles Williams. Courtesy of Atlanta Contemporary