

enormous vitality and a pan-spiritual animation. —Janet Koplos

### Sue Williams at 303

Early in the 1990s, Sue Williams made a stylistic about-face. She left behind her cartoony, roughly executed, graphic depictions of brutalities against women which were captioned with text-bubbles in favor of increasingly abstract compositions built of colorful, frenetic lines. Williams continued to explore the theme of sexual abuse, but the increased abstraction and gestural vigor of these wordless, pictorial ciphers resulted in a new expressive opacity and even lyricism. This drastic shift in style came as a great surprise to many, especially those who had commended her direct interventionary tactics. At first glance, it appeared that Williams had lost her feminist fervor.

Her latest paintings represent another step in this "politically indirect" esthetic. Large, less congested, brightly colored and filled with droopy and grabby things, these are not works with overt ideological content but paintings about painting, about gesture, calligraphy and drawing. Indeed, it would appear that the artist's primary concern here is an esthetic one: the conflation of drawing and painting.

While abstraction and nonobjectivity reign supreme, viewers seeking the explicit sexual parts which inhabited Williams's earlier canvases will find them. In *Accident Pants* (1998), soles of shoes, drooping breasts and limp penises morph into cow udders, while anuses

eject bright, calligraphic explosions. Likewise, in *Frolicking Green Shoes* (1998), caricatural penises soar through the composition with flapping testicles for wings. Appendages and organs still abound in these canvases, but the actions portrayed are so distorted, the forms so fragmentary, that any narrative interpretation is denied. The viewer's mind completes these morphological transformations; Williams merely suggests them.

Perhaps Williams's recourse to abstraction is a response to criticism that her earlier work was too obvious or too crude. The question to ask is whether her new esthetic is so obscure as to have lost its political thrust. But, one could argue, after the aggression of her best-known work, almost anything would seem tame and perversely poetic. —Maura Reilly

### Laura Owens at Gavin Brown's Enterprise

Laura Owens's strong suits are scale and a Color-Fieldish sensitivity to a big painting's margins. In the past, the reference has sometimes been explicit, for instance with stained stripes running down a painting's sides. But in her last show in New York, and also in a recent one in Los Angeles, she turned a few snippets of cornball figuration—a tendril of vegetation, a sliver of '50s-ish interior—into virtuosous demonstrations of spatial engineering.

Two of the five paintings at



Sue Williams: *Accident Pants*, 1998, oil on acrylic on canvas, 82 by 132 inches; at 303.

Gavin Brown continue in this figurative mode. In one, a big, flat beige sky is impinged upon by a few cartoony clouds, most riding in from the edges, though one is adrift. At the left, near the top, is a tree limb with a few papery-looking leaves in Crayola shades of chartreuse, orange and red. Behind the branch is a slender form that appears to be its shadow, cast onto a sky transformed, in a stroke, to a theatrical backdrop. Below, a stream curves toward the distance, its contours steeply foreshortened. On its slightly crazed surface—the first signs of frost, or another semaphore of tension in the two-dimensional field?—a few leaves float.

The other figurative painting, a smaller, busier composition, renders an igloo-like beehive in coloring-book blocks of brown, orange and gold. Buzzing around it are bees so thickly painted their rosy forms cast shadows. Warhol's unfinished paint-by-numbers exercises come to mind; Owens's involvement with kitsch seems untroubled by high-style obligations to feign ambivalence.

The remaining paintings shown are abstract, although she cleaves to recognizable subject matter. One eye-popping new work begins with rainbow-shaped bands of white, brown and green, painted so crisply they appear to be airbrushed. Strewn across this tidy surface are thick wipes, squiggles and splats of pigment, some apparently squeezed straight from the tube. This painting is a determined pastiche, its range of citations reaching from Dove to Twombly. Thinner in application, though no less seductive, is a tall canvas with ghosts of polka dots

just visible beneath its white surface. Above them are sharply drawn loops of stiff paint in black and gray and, more often, squeaky clean shades of aqua, pink, green and purple.

Bubbly isn't Owens's only mode. In another work, penciled arabesques dance across a misty field of melancholy lavenders and mauves; the tone is third-hand Matta as interpreted by, say, a commercial textile designer ca. 1955. A generation late for irony, which requires a stable wall to kick against, Owens seems to see the relationship between popular culture and modernist painting as a marriage of convenience long upstaged by its offspring. Like her regard for past painting, her touch is tender and calculating at the same time, unerring in its caricatures, and never less than engrossing. —Nancy Princenthal

## BOSTON

### Joan Banach at Mario Diacono

Joan Banach's five sepia-toned paintings, all oil on wood and dated 1997 or '98, derive their tension and mystery from a mix of figurative imagery and abstract painting practices. Dramatic and dreamlike, each work has a straightforward figurative element, usually at center stage. As backdrops Banach provides fields of organic abstraction, elusive in tone and meticulously constructed.

In *Magnetism*, a semi-swooning woman, wrapped in a coat, emerges through a veil of melting, weeping blobs. The figure, sharply photographic and rendered in negative, takes on a

Laura Owens: *Untitled*, 1998, acrylic on canvas, 66 by 72 inches; at Gavin Brown's Enterprise.

