

LG WILLIAMS: UNCONVEN- TIONAL WISDOM

By Jenna Duncan



From November 14 through December 21, 2012, the Gloria Maria Gallery in Milan held an LG Williams ("Anthropology") with the artist's gallery, "Super Window Project." The show received massive amounts of publicity in Europe, including a comprehensive listing of his work in *Mousse Magazine*. "In Milan, they love art," Williams says. "I got so much publicity. Everybody came. In Milan, it's like you're a rock star."

For a working American artist that you've probably never heard of, LG Williams is pretty damn important. He has participated in five international exhibits in the last year alone.

Williams currently teaches art history, photography and studio painting at Phoenix College. He loves teaching because he doesn't believe that anyone

should approach art, or even try to make it, without a thorough foundation in the classics, the basics—at least some understanding of line quality.

Williams grew up in the Ozarks, in a small, rugged community. There has always been poverty and hardship in those parts, he explains, but nowadays the main menace is meth. "My mother was a shrink-doctor—a psychologist," he says. "And she knew I was an artist from about the time that I was one and a half years old."

His early life could have gone many directions, it seems. But fortunately, he headed for Kansas City, Missouri, to study at Kansas City Art Institute. It was there that he was taken under the wing of Dale Eldred, head of the sculpture department.

"He was a great friend and teacher of mine," Williams says. "By a strange coincidence, they have a really important artwork of his on the ASU campus, near the museum." (ASU's main campus actually has two of Eldred's sculptures displayed outdoors, *Vision Lens: Light and Future* and *Time Garden*.)

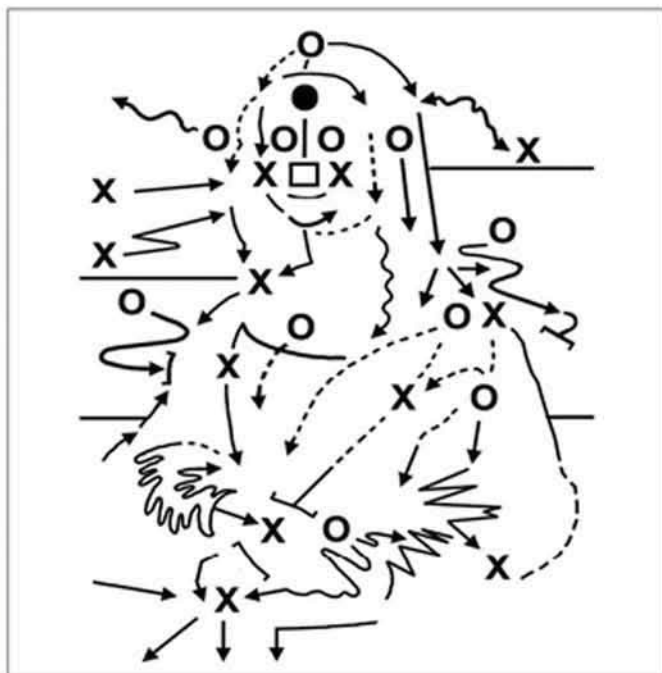
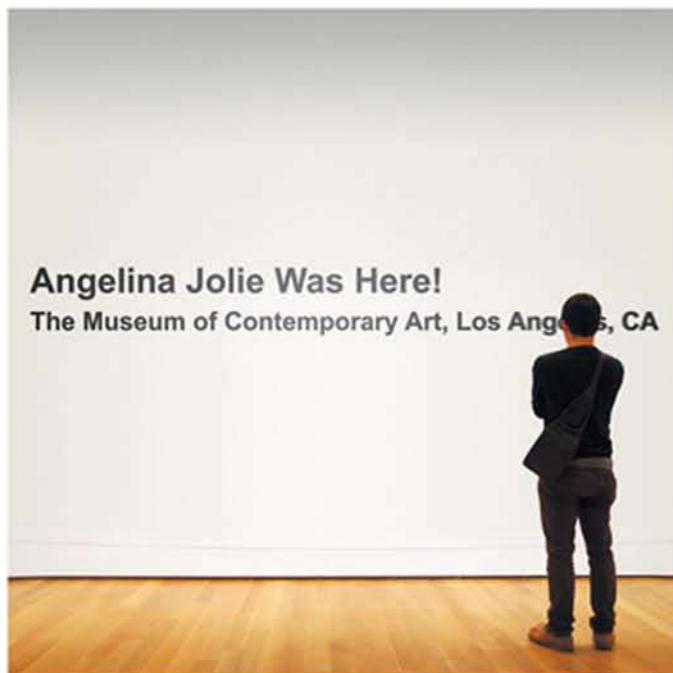
"I had the choice to go to grad school at either Yale or University of California Davis. They were the two number one schools for art at the time. One was more commercial and popular, that was Yale. And the other was the more counter-cultural. [UC Davis] has actually produced the best artist living today, Bruce Nauman," says Williams.

Williams was interested in Yale, but he heeded his mentor Eldred's advice and decided to forgo the commercial route and focus on critical art. It was through UC Davis that he met all of the great countercultural artists of the West Coast. He formed a close friendship with San Francisco artist Wally Hedrick. According to Williams, they were best friends for the last 20 years of Hedrick's life. "He was such an amazing unknown artist. He dropped out of the commercial art scene at a young age and actually went into exile for the final 35 years of his life."

Hedrick was fired from the San Francisco Art Institute around 1972 for encouraging his students to stage a walkout in protest of the Vietnam War. After that, he dropped out of the mainstream for good. "He is so important... We wouldn't have 'Howl' without Wally Hedrick," Williams says. "He set up the event that created the San Francisco revolution. He got Ginsberg to read that night."

Hedrick's ex-wife, also a key player in the 1960s San Francisco art scene, Jay DeFeo is currently being honored with a retrospective at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (through Feb. 3, 2013). "Hedrick and DeFeo and all of the West Coast critical artists of the 1960s are finally getting their credit!" Williams says.

The spirit of rebellion that was so strong in the 1960s may have mellowed, but it certainly left a mark on a handful of artists who, to this day, stand up for the little guy and speak for the disenchanted. LG Williams is one of these artists, although he walks a fine, semi-farcical line between being a no-money guy and a big-money guy. He says owes many of his successes to an art dealer named Baron Osuna. According to Williams, Baron Osuna belongs to the same family of patrons who supported Francisco Goya.



Williams' full name is Lawrence Graham Williams, III. But don't bother searching for him on Wikipedia. His Wiki entry was deleted in 2008 under complaints that it contained "blatant advertising" and didn't meet Wikipedia's "notability guidelines." However, because nothing posted on the Internet truly ever dies, a complete archive of the listing can still be found on Deletionpedia (deletionpedia.dbatley.com), and it contains a pretty good overview of Williams' works from 1988 through 2008.

A more recent piece that Williams describes as one of his most important was completed while he was living on the beach and surfing during a four-year stint in Hawaii. "House Where the Bottom Fell Out" is an installation that Williams created in 2009. He drew inspiration from the financial crisis—literally observing the many families whose lives were turned upside down by bad mortgages and foreclosure.

Williams found an abandoned house in Maui, built on stilts up against a mountain. He sought out the previous owners of the property, but no one could be located. That is when he began to realize a great vision. He decided to make the metaphor work. He would literally rip the floor from the house, leaving only the façade facing out. "The house is actually

cantilevered into the mountain," he says. "During the day, if you look at it straight on, you can't actually see that the floor is not there."

After ripping the bottom floor from the house, he illuminated the structure from below. When lit from underneath, the house appears to be floating on a floor of light. The windows still hum with radiance—almost as though there was still life in it.

Once he got the approval of the local squatters to install, they actually volunteered to protect and look after it. "House Where the Bottom Fell Out" became a monument, a statement to the hurt that was going on (and still continues) following the housing collapse.

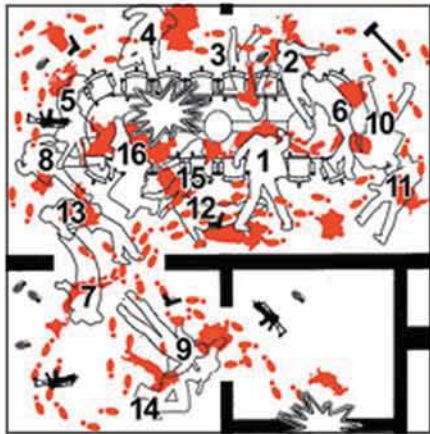
Williams lived in Hawaii, bouncing between Maui and Oahu for about four years, and then moved to Tokyo temporarily. "I had the most incredible job that you could imagine," Williams says of his time in Tokyo. "I was an art critic for the oldest, English-speaking, free newspaper in Japan. It is called *Tokyo Weekender Magazine*."

Williams said that he loved Tokyo, but that he and his associates "fled," after reading about the potential

dangers of the damaged Fukushima Daiichi plant in the *New York Times* online. And so, he and his partner landed in the Phoenix area.

LG Williams' Scottsdale condo seems like a gallery unto itself. The living room area is home to a good amount of his own work: parts of large vinyl installations he has put on over the years, including part of a vinyl "S" from his "Left of Stupid" show in Tokyo a few years back, newer works such as his painting "The Professionals™" and works from some of his online art projects from a few years ago.

One of Williams' digitally based "artworks" that garnered thousands of hits across the web was a series he posted on Craigslist in the Help Wanted section. Each ad summarized a job description, working conditions, pay (and in some cases, even diets) of several great artists, including Wally Hedrick and Andy Warhol (without naming names, of course). Williams posted these ads, and then sat back and waited for a response. He was overwhelmed with the amount of serious attention that his listings elicited. "I received more than 5,000 responses in a 28-day period," Williams says. "Four serious marriage



proposals, four vacation offers. It was a great response to an artwork."

Some of the postings advertised requirements of the job that seemed anything but glamorous. For example, for some of the artist positions, one would be required to work 18-20 hours per day for minimum wage with no job security and no benefits.

After posting the listings in 40 major cities, including New York, Rome, Tokyo, Berlin, there were 5000 different individuals all vying for a position as Artist/Director or Commercial Artist. There is a collection of Williams' top 200 or so responses compiled in an art book entitled *Help Wanted*.

At a more recent and unorthodox installation, LG Williams brought his taste for farce to the Venice

Biennale 2011, where he was also invited to do an installation at the Digital Pavilion.

"Everything is for sale in the U.S. now. It's like, 'Sell it all, sell it fast! Let's make a commission!'" LG Williams says. "Look at the Post Office. You've got Senator Feinstein's husband selling off all the old Post Office buildings. And they are selling the most expensive ones first."

The rationale was, if we can sell off Post Offices for millions of dollars a piece, why can't we sell off the US's Biennale Pavilion? For art martyrs it may seem crass, but in a way, Williams has a point.

Williams decided that he should take a step to help the U.S. in its deep, mind-boggling money crisis. He posted a "For Sale by Artist" sign outside of the Biennale Pavilion, which was promptly removed by authorities. But Williams took the plan a few steps further, drafting his own press releases and property listing tear sheet. The listing sheet provided the address, amenities, square-footage (2,567 sq. ft.) and an asking price of almost \$17 million. Right away, he was contacted by several parties with serious offers. "A few of them thought the asking price was a little too high," he says.

In his subtle way, Williams is criticizing not only the U.S. and its consumer culture, but also the warped mind of the art world in its lust to buy and sell everything. "The art world hasn't been innocent since the 1960s," he says. The for-profit art world yields bizarre offspring. We can take and examine the art world as a microcosm of a greater evil in the U.S. and certainly in the world. And that is the shift in values that means nothing is sacred.

At the end of the day, anything and everything is for sale.

Williams paraphrases an idea of Thomas Paine, that America in essence is a living experiment. A living work of "performance art." But where it has all gone awry is that the artists are no longer in charge.

One of Williams' chief complaints is that art criticism isn't critical anymore. "There's no dissent in the art world today," he says. "There has to be a voice who says, 'Hold on, this isn't right!'"

When he's seen a need for artists to be smacked into line, Williams has certainly stepped up to make a statement. For example, Williams says that he was greatly disturbed by many of the details and the overall ethos of world-renowned poster artist Shepherd Fairey's actions participating in the Obama "Hope" campaign poster design.

Fairey recently pleaded guilty to falsifying information as to where he obtained the original photo he used to create the official Obama "Hope" poster image. He had initially claimed that he used a photo that would have fallen under fair use copyright permissions, but it was proven that he actually used an image without permission that was taken by a freelance photographer for the Associated Press. During the investigation, Fairey destroyed and altered documentation that would lead to the original image.

But Fairey's dishonesty in this case wasn't the only thing that turned Williams off, Williams says. He was mostly dismayed that Fairey, the founder of the Obey company, and a symbol for teenage rebels and skaters everywhere, would so easily sell out his own audience. And for so cheap.

To retaliate, Williams created the Obama Hope Scam website, brilliant in its simplicity (obamahopescam.com). Upon initial visit, it reads like many of the reactionary, misanthropic, one-party-against-the-other propagandist angry blog sites. But if one looks closer at the rhetoric, the entire spectacle is rife with irony and humor.

"How could a man who is supposed to represent democracy and capitalism stand up and allow his image to be mixed with images of Communism? Or allow himself to be likened to Che Guevara?" Williams asks.

There is another, more obscure layer to Williams' punking of Shepherd Fairey, and it involves an image commissioned for a 300-print limited run during one of Fairey's big L.A. art shows a few years back. However, not enough details have been confirmed to fully describe the prank, or to say whether or not it was effective.

Williams' punking of Fairey was also part of a response to the much-hyped punking that graffiti artist Banksy pulled on Paris Hilton when her album came out a few years ago. Banksy had taken images of Paris Hilton from her album cover and grossly manipulated them so that in some she appeared topless with oversized breasts exposed, in some images her face was Photoshop-swapped with that of a dog, lewd language and other "inappropriate" materials were added. (banksypunked.com)

"I spend a lot of time asking those questions," Williams says. "Like, 'What is good?' Good art should have complexity, layers of meaning. Art is the place where elitism should thrive." ■