

BROOKLYN RAIL

“Didier William with Charles M. Schultz,” *The Brooklyn Rail*, February 2023

Art | In Conversation

Didier William with Charles M. Schultz

“I wanted a discrete object to do the temporal work of reading a body in space. And I trusted that painting could do that work.”



Portrait of Didier William, pencil on paper by Phong H. Bui.

In Miami, the largest gathering of Didier William’s work yet to be assembled took place. Years of conversations and studio visits with Dr. Erica Moiah James led to a selection of paintings and prints that convey a passage of artistic evolution. The passage is concerned with the figure. Twenty years ago William had been exploring abstract compositions until the murder of Trayvon Martin compelled a new direction. This exhibition begins at that moment and concludes at its chronological counterpart: the birth of a child and the formation of a family.

The conversation that follows took place on the Rail’s *New Social Environment*. Didier William dialed in from his studio in Philadelphia. It was midday and his interlocutor was Charles Schultz, the Rail’s managing editor. In the hour that followed William and Schultz presented images of the artist’s exhibition as they discussed aspects of his working process, the connection between his life and the imagery that occurs on his surfaces, and how a sense of loss can be an important part of representation.

ON VIEW

Moca North Miami

Didier William: *Nou Kite*

Tout Sa Dèyè

November 2, 2022–April 16, 2023

ALTMAN SIEGEL

1150 25TH ST. SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94107

tel: 415.576.9300 / fax: 415.373.4471

www.altmansiegel.com

Charles M. Schultz (Rail): Your exhibition is titled *Nou Kite Tout Sa Dèyè*, which means “We’ve left that all behind.” Would you tell me about that phrase?

Didier William: The title came about in several meetings with the curator, Dr. Erica Moiah James, who is based in Miami. We had several lead up meetings to talk about the work, but we’d have longer, more personal conversations too, about my family, about our immigration story, about life in Miami, and she would often ask what my parents thought of my work. What kind of input did my parents give me? Because I’m making work that references anecdotes from Haiti, from our early years in the United States. And oftentimes, when I asked them about back home—our house back home, the people back home, all that kind of stuff—they would often say “Nou Kite Tout Sa Dèyè,” or in English, “We left all that behind,” “Forget about it.” “We’re here now.”

I think in many ways they were sort of shielding themselves from the trauma that was embedded in those narratives, and maybe in their minds they were inadvertently shielding me from it too. So there was always this wall of memory or this wall of distance that I felt existed for them. We moved to Miami when I was six years old, so most of what I know about Haiti is pulled from them and my brothers.

I think for both Dr. James and me there was a degree of irony to the title because as many of us who are from other countries know, you can’t in fact leave that stuff behind. It stays with you. It’s in your corporeal reality. It’s in your skin. It’s in your body. It’s in the material around you. I mean, our house was full of artifacts and textiles and things that my mom brought with her from Haiti. Each of those things contain one of these narratives.

Rail: Dr. James is from the Bahamas. Is that right?

William: Yes, she was the Director of the National Gallery in the Bahamas and she taught art history at Yale for a bit. Now she is a professor at University of Miami. When the opportunity for the show came about, MOCA was working primarily with guest curators. Chana Sheldon, the museum’s executive director, and I immediately thought of Dr. James.

Rail: In the process of working with Dr. James, what surprised you? What insight did she provide into your work that you didn’t see?

ALTMAN SIEGEL

1150 25TH ST. SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94107

tel: 415.576.9300 / fax: 415.373.4471

www.altmansiegel.com

William: I mean, she's a phenomenal reader and thinker of images. She was able to take a broad scope—sort of a bird's eye view—of my practice, and connect dots that I wasn't thinking about. There's one painting in the show, *I Remember When I Was a Little Girl* (2011), that I made at the Marie Walsh Sharpe Art Foundation residency—now the Sharpe-Walentas Studio Program. It was one of the first paintings I made where I was returning to the figure. Initially I didn't think it would be part of the show. But Dr. James did an amazing job of kind of zooming back and saying, "Hey, wait a minute. A lot of the things we're talking about here, the checkpoint for that happened with this painting."



Didier William, *I Remember When I Was a Little Girl*, 2015. Acrylic, oil, wood stain on panel, 60 x 48 inches. Courtesy the artist.

ALTMAN SIEGEL

1150 25TH ST. SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94107

tel: 415.576.9300 / fax: 415.373.4471

www.altmansiegel.com

Rail: It's the earliest painting in the exhibition, is that correct? And the only non-representational work?

William: It's the earliest painting in the show and the only work that doesn't have any wood carving. It was the first painting to go back to the figure. There's this kind of inverted phallus, this inverted sexualized form—it was one of the first times I started to think about how gender and sex will be re-performed now that I'm returning to the figure. The way I was conceptualizing queerness in the work, not necessarily even having the language of queerness at the time. It's positioned immediately to the left when you walk into the exhibition before you enter the more sort of anecdotal, metaphorical, mythological paintings.

Rail: So it's one of the first works the viewer sees when they enter the exhibition space.

William: Yeah, it's funny because looking at it now, I can see that the bottom of this painting is what my work looked like, say from 2009 to 2011: mostly non-representational, quite abstract. I had just left graduate school and I wanted a break from the body; I wanted a break from anatomy; I wanted a break from figure. I wanted to see what the material could do, setting up certain conditions of friction, and using gravity to sort of engage those conditions. I was looking at Frankenthaler and Norman Lewis and a lot of abstract expressionist painting.

But then something drove me back to the body. It coincided with the beginning of state-sanctioned violence on Black and brown people being captured on film. Namely Trayvon Martin, who was murdered not that far away from Miami, in Sanford, Florida, where I grew up. I started to rethink how I was conceptualizing figuration, how I was conceptualizing the body. How I was conceptualizing representation and what risks were involved in that—what was at stake in the process, both for me and for the viewer. I started asking myself different questions: How do I slow it down even further from just rote representation? How do I completely halt the process? How do I halt the circuitry of looking between a viewer and a body on a painting? I wasn't interested in switching to video or anything. I wanted a discrete object to do the temporal work of reading a body in space. And I trusted that painting could do that work.

ALTMAN SIEGEL

1150 25TH ST. SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94107

tel: 415.576.9300 / fax: 415.373.4471

www.altmansiegel.com

One day not too long afterwards I made the painting, *His Life Depends On Spotted Lies* (2015), which was the first time I started carving anything. It's a much smaller piece. It's 20 by 16 inches—a very small piece. There was a kind of portrait figure, and a green and blue tapestry in the back. The figure itself was stained, and then I think out of frustration or boredom or just the curious desire to see something else in the picture, I started carving onto the surface. Instead of painting the eyes where they would normally go, I carved two eyes onto the surface of the panel. Because my MFA was in painting and printmaking I had all these wood carving materials at my disposal. I was working on this panel, and I just kept carving into it. I carved from the top of the head to the base of the neck. And at the end of that experience, I realized that I hadn't just removed something, I had added something to the panel. I thought I wasn't engaged in this reductive process, but in effect, taking something away actually added something to the panel that wasn't previously there. And I didn't know how to name it. I didn't know what it was. I didn't know anything about it. I just knew that it was deeply, physically satisfying. Something happened that I've sort of been in that curious zone with carving ever since, except now it's ballooned into my entire studio practice.

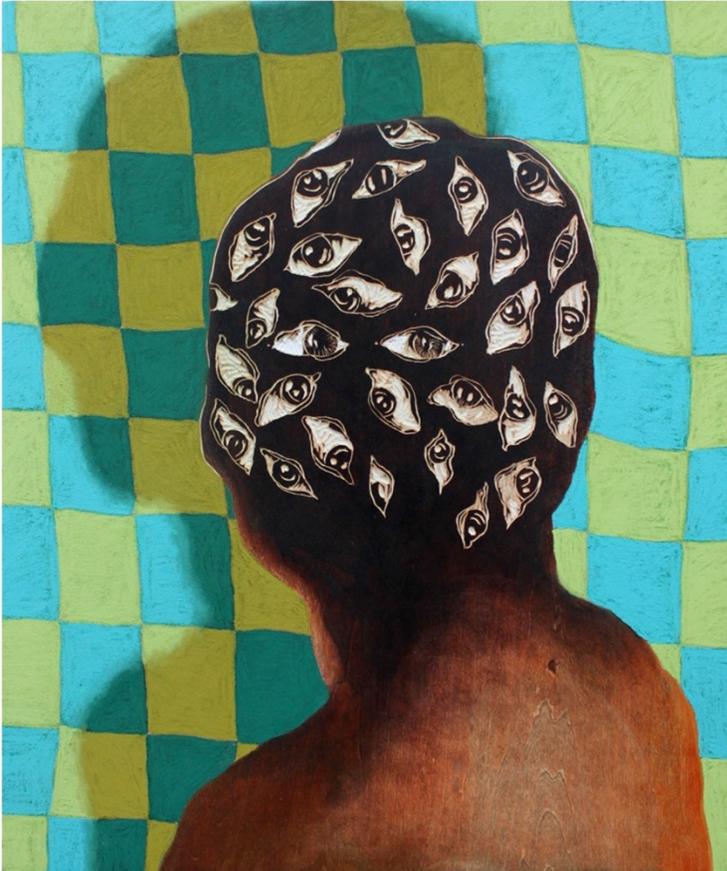
[*Laughter*]

ALTMAN SIEGEL

1150 25TH ST. SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94107

tel: 415.576.9300 / fax: 415.373.4471

www.altmansiegel.com



Didier William, *His Life Depends on Spotted Lies*, 2015. Wood stain, pastel, wood carving on panel, 20 x 16 inches. Courtesy the artist.

Rail: A lot of your work is quite large. How did your experience of gouging into the panels change as you began to scale up your efforts?

William: In the beginning I was doing it manually, which as you can imagine was torture on my wrist. Actually, I made the first one on my bed in my Brooklyn apartment, and then I had to dust off all the sawdust so that I wouldn't get stabbed by it when I went to sleep. *[Laughter]* Subsequently, I started to wonder what kinds of tools I could use to dig deeper and further into the surface of the wood. I worked with a fabricator who is based in New York and he suggested birch because it is a soft material. So I started carving into birch, and then started thinking about the scale and size of the bodies, and how I could replicate the drawings that I was beginning with. Everything begins with drawing.

ALTMAN SIEGEL

1150 25TH ST. SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94107

tel: 415.576.9300 / fax: 415.373.4471

www.altmansiegel.com

I have hundreds and hundreds of drawings that don't ever make it to the paintings. The drawings that I'm excited about and want to invest more into—I transfer them onto the surface of the panel. They then get stained with dark, almost black ink. Once that is dry, I draw other figures onto the panel. And then they get carved with a rotary tool. So it sounds like a dentist's office in my studio pretty much all day. [*Laughter*]

In the beginning, the figures were much smaller and more intimate. But I wanted them to be larger than life, to be just beyond life-scale, to stand up outside of the panel as if they were eight or nine feet tall. And I've 's something sort of autobiographical about the bodies—I'm a pretty big guy, and I always have been. I've always been aware of how the measurements of the conventional world are designed with a particular body in mind. When you are outside of that particular measurement scale, you're hyper aware of it. How could I turn that into a super-strength rather than something that was diminishing?

So my figures are always in the space of titans, sort of a dream space—I don't even think about them as human. I don't think of them as people. I think of them as apparitions or titans, something aspirational, which allows me to project further into the mythology of these narratives.

Rail: Before we go too much further into your process and history, I want to come back to 's a big show; there's more than forty paintings in two rooms. One room is set up as an anti-chamber; the walls are dark. And then there's a secondary room that is large and bright. There are three major new paintings in the smaller room, and a selection of your prints. Why these three paintings? Why this selection of prints?

ALTMAN SIEGEL

1150 25TH ST. SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94107

tel: 415.576.9300 / fax: 415.373.4471

www.altmansiegel.com



Installation view, *Didier William: Nou Kite Tout Sa Dèyè*, November 2nd, 2022-April 16, 2023, at the Museum of Contemporary Art, North Miami (MOCA). Courtesy of The Museum of Contemporary Art. Photo: Michael Lopez.

William: Initially we didn't think about including prints. But as of about the last maybe three, four years, the discrete print has started to become a bigger part of my practice—right around when Dr. James and I started having our conversations. As she started to discover some of these prints, she suggested we include a selection in the exhibition. That selection occupies one wall, and then facing those prints are three paintings: two are of these houses—*83rd St* and *125th St* (both 2022)—that are sort of precariously and buoyantly nestled within this mass of bodies, and the third, titled *Just Us Three* (2021), is figurative. That was a difficult painting because it is about my husband and I becoming parents. I knew I wanted to make a painting about that experience but I could have never anticipated that our journey would align almost exactly with a global pandemic.

I remember I sat back in my studio and thought, “What do I do? How do I make? How do I have this 's gonna play out.” I wanted to make a piece that highlighted the fact that for about a year it was just the three of us: myself, my husband, and our daughter. We couldn't introduce our friends to our baby, we couldn't introduce our family to our baby. It felt like we were sitting on this sort of precarious cliff, not knowing what was behind us, and not knowing what was ahead of us, but needing to just sort of hold on to one another as best as we could. That's how the painting came about.

ALTMAN SIEGEL

1150 25TH ST. SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94107

tel: 415.576.9300 / fax: 415.373.4471

www.altmansiegel.com



Didier William, *Just Us Three*, 2021. Acrylic, oil, wood carving on panel, 104 x 68 inches. Courtesy James Fuentes Gallery.

Rail: I love how the body language is not what one would expect. There's no cradle. I like the way the small figure is crawling on the two larger figures, which are interlocked in a way that communicates togetherness, even tenderness, despite the fact that they're not doing typical things like hugging or holding hands or anything like that. How did you decide on this body language?

ALTMAN SIEGEL

1150 25TH ST. SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94107

tel: 415.576.9300 / fax: 415.373.4471

www.altmansiegel.com

William: Well, I wanted it awkward. [*Laughter*]. Anybody who has had a child can attest to this awkwardness. It was our first baby—we now have two kids—and there was a lot of awkwardness going from a couple to being a family of three. The entire landscape of our home changed, and our relationships to each other did too. I was trying to figure out how to handle this new unit of three and I didn't want sentimentality to take over the painting. I wanted the bodies' sort of Tetris-like attempt to interlock with one another to be the fulcrum of the painting.

Rail: Thanks Didier, that's beautiful. How about the two paintings of houses, *83rd St.* and *125 St.*? I noticed that the shape enveloping the houses along the bottom is similar to the shapes in the prints on the wall nearby, titled *Cursed Grounds: Blessed Bones* (2022). What's the relationship or connection here?

William: The two works aren't connected, but I have been thinking a lot about this idea of looking at two spaces at once, looking at multiple spaces at once—so the picture plane straddles an area above some kind of cross section of Earth and an area below. That has become this whole series of works called "Cursed Grounds." The one in the exhibition, *Cursed Grounds: Blessed Bones*, is a four-plate copper etching that was printed in collaboration with Harlan & Weaver press in New York. Felix Harlan, master printer, did a phenomenal job with that print. And then the others have been paintings that also follow this kind of stratified earth composition where you're looking at an area above and you're looking at an area that's at eye level, and you're looking at an area below. And the area below makes up these conglomerations of bodies, these ancestors, for lack of a better word. And then the area above, in some cases, is a landscape.

ALTMAN SIEGEL

1150 25TH ST. SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94107

tel: 415.576.9300 / fax: 415.373.4471

www.altmansiegel.com



Didier William, *Cursed Grounds: Blessed Bones*, 2022. Multiplate color intaglio. 44 x 35 5/8 inches., Courtesy James Fuentes Gallery.

In that particular print it's this park that's close to our house, a little park that we like to take my daughter to, and it has these really beautiful trees that she loves to run around in. I took a picture of it, drew those trees out, and then in print—I think it's a four or five color spit bite that makes up those trees. At the bottom of the piece the eye pattern is printed in a flat bite. And then there's another pattern underneath it, which you can see a little bit in yellow, like a yellowy-green, and that's the Haitian voodoo *Lwa*, Papa Legba, who's the guardian of the underworld. And so you're looking at these two different spaces at the same time that offer two completely different realities. And one thing to mention in the print, I really wanted the bodies to feel like they were made out of chains or something. Once we printed that proof and I saw the beautiful capacity of intaglio. But next to the trees it felt really rigid and stiff, and I loved that. If it could be auditory, I wanted it to sound like chains rattling—completely different from the way that conglomeration of bodies happens in the paintings.

The two paintings that you were mentioning depict the first two houses that my family lived in, in Miami. Those paintings came about not necessarily suddenly, but once I knew the show was going to happen, and I knew the show was gonna include all of these paintings that were metaphorical and mythological, and me sort of indulging all of these fantastical modes of

ALTMAN SIEGEL

1150 25TH ST. SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94107

tel: 415.576.9300 / fax: 415.373.4471

www.altmansiegel.com

storytelling, it felt important to bookend the exhibition and frame the literal location where those things took place. Some of the paintings are about events that happened in Miami with me and my brothers, our immigration process, intimate moments that happened to me in Miami, accidents that happened in Miami, traumatic and horrific moments that happened in Miami —the containers for all of those things were these two houses we lived in.

For those two paintings, I wanted to shift the visual language and pull up architectural renderings of those houses and try to remain faithful to those renderings and those measurements, and preserve and respect the integrity of these houses, even though they're sort of nestled in these masses; they're nestled in these spaces, and still subject to that fragile history. I wanted the houses to sort of reign supreme in the exhibition and claim that space right away, and really in some ways, honor those houses because they were the spaces that kept us safe and kept us secure and protected us when we were applying for American citizenship and contained a lot of the documents that kept my family in good standing with the American government. And so when you walk into the exhibition, you see the green house and then you see the orange house, and then in between them on the perpendicular wall is *Just Us Three*.



Didier William, *125th St.*, 2022. Acrylic, ink, and wood carving on panel, 70 x 106 inches. Courtesy James Fuentes Gallery.

ALTMAN SIEGEL

1150 25TH ST. SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94107

tel: 415.576.9300 / fax: 415.373.4471

www.altmansiegel.com

Rail: It's a beautiful triangulation of paintings and ideas. It communicates a whole lot about what builds life, what sustains life, what structures enable life. To me, it looks like the two houses, and the natural or ancestral zones they're nestled in, are floating in this amorphous area. Do you read it as floating? Do you read it differently?

William: I don't object to floating. I like to think of them as groundless. I've always wanted to remove ground and remove gravity from the paintings, but keep their presence intact. If I could extract gravity from the reality that I'm trying to depict, but keep everything else contained, what kind of liberation could that offer my characters? What kind of freedom could that offer me in terms of presenting these places in a way that was more honest and truthful to what I and my loved ones experienced?

Process-wise, it's always a question for me when I'm building these competitions: how do I make them as groundless as possible? One of my favorite painters is Robert Colescott. In many ways he used a similar strategy where you feel like the entire thing is sort of—like if you tilted the painting this way, it would slide off the table or slide off the ground. I think it added this level of perceptual instability that made Colescott's painting even more politically jarring, and even more powerful. Not just the content, but that the actual infrastructure of the painting—the pegs were being pulled out of it. That's always been 've always envied that, and wanted to replicate it in my work. Others have mentioned it as a kind of a lift, as a kind of a groundlessness, and I love that because it all points to this idea that flight is liberatory. And that's kind of where I want that to sit.

ALTMAN SIEGEL

1150 25TH ST. SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94107

tel: 415.576.9300 / fax: 415.373.4471

www.altmansiegel.com



Installation view, *Didier William: Nou Kite Tout Sa Dèyè*, November 2nd, 2022–April 16, 2023, at the Museum of Contemporary Art, North Miami (MOCA). Courtesy of The Museum of Contemporary Art. Photo: Michael Lopez.

Rail: As you're talking about groundlessness and removing gravity, I'm reminded of the sculpture you made for the show, *Poto Mitan 2* (2022). It's a stunning work. I see bodies in a vertical stack that sort of hangs in the center of the gallery. I know that it connects to ideas of 's a sense of awkwardness as well in the way that you've stacked them. Do you see it similarly? As an escape from gravity and a move towards liberation?

William: It hangs from airline wires that you can see a little bit, but it doesn't touch the ground. It hovers maybe eight inches above the floor. So it just kind of floats in the center of the room as you're looking at the rest of the paintings.

When Dr. James and I were talking about the show and I pointed to my interest and previous history in sculpture, I decided to make a new work for the exhibition, the stack of bodies that's about 12 feet tall, and title it "Poto Mitan." In Haitian voodoo the poto mitan is the pole in the center of the room around which ritual and worship takes place. The pole is considered to be the portal or gateway between our world and the world of the gods. Very often you would hang worship objects, or precious objects—things that you love—on the pole. Many times it's made of wood, and sometimes it's even made of a living tree.

For my work, I wanted the pole to still be a portal or a gateway, but I wanted that gateway to be made of bodies, because I think when we're talking about

ALTMAN SIEGEL

1150 25TH ST. SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94107

tel: 415.576.9300 / fax: 415.373.4471

www.altmansiegel.com

narratives of immigration, oftentimes the human unit of measurement is the body. The way in which we gauge our distance between now and something that we call home is either through our bodies or the bodies of the ones that we love. So it made sense for me to take this thing that would normally be an inanimate object, and animate it with the bodies of my characters, so that it felt like the bodies were jumping from the surface of the paintings and right into the middle of the room. And it's right in the center so that when you walk into the exhibition, you sort of have to walk around it in order to see the paintings, and it's always sort of hovering behind you too.

Rail: Earlier you were talking about your move from non-representational work to representational work through the tragic death of Trayvon Martin. But it wasn't just bodies that began to appear in your work, but bodies that—as another writer called it—have an “epidermal eye-shield.” So now you've been doing it for, well, a decade. How has the meaning of a body covered with eyes shifted for you? Or maybe it hasn't? What's happened over the last decade?

William: Yeah, definitely, but I've only loosely taken stock of all the ways that it has changed. Initially, the startling thing about it, the thing that surprised me, was that it forced me to be super present. That's what I loved about it, but that was also the thing that scared me, because it brought me right to the surface of the work. It was a literal measurement of the amount of time I spent at that surface, about six to eight inches away.

So the reductive process gave way to this experience of complete presence that I wanted to happen for my viewer too. For me, that gets closer to the experience of representation than any kind of illusionistic process. And that moment has evolved over time to become this question of presence that I think is essential when we're talking about representation at large, but specifically the representation of narratives that include Black and brown people. It's a temporal, fragile, vulnerable process that I've always wanted to hold on to and insist that my viewers experience as well.

Over time, that moment has expanded to not just include the bodies in the paintings, but it's now part of the way that the actual architecture in the paintings is built. Now the wall is made up of this map of Haiti. Now the fabric on the bedsheet is made up of these symbols in Haitian voodoo that my mom talked about, but that I never thought about in this way. It's turned into a strategy to think about how everything materializes. I became less interested in the perceptual tricks I can use to make things look more real, and more

ALTMAN SIEGEL

1150 25TH ST. SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94107

tel: 415.576.9300 / fax: 415.373.4471

www.altmansiegel.com

interested in the temporal process of bringing those things to an experiential condition for the viewer. The first time I saw that happening was when I started carving eyes onto the bodies of the figures. Now, it permeates every part of the surface.

Rail: It's fascinating to listen to you talk about how you're layering information into the paintings in an increasingly complicated manner. I find one of the challenges to doing that is that your audience doesn't always have access to that information. We come to the work with what we have, we find what we find. And—

William: Well, that's an important point, because it highlights the fact that loss is part of representation. Ninety-nine percent of the time loss is very much part of the experience of those who are being represented. And so I like the idea that there is something lost in the process here and contending with that loss is part of what we're talking about when we talk about representation at large, but specifically the representation of Black and brown people whose histories are subject to a tremendous amount of loss. I think wrestling with that condition, both in the process and in the way that work is read and consumed, needs to be centered. That's very important for me.

Sometimes the works are titled in Haitian Creole. Sometimes I've given translations and other times I've asked my gallery not to give translations. And that means some people won't know what a painting is titled, and I'm okay with that because there are other layers of legibility for that person to hook on to and get into the content of the work. Stacking those layers of legibility is really exciting for me, because sometimes it gives way to things I never even imagined.

Rail: I couldn't agree with you more about that, but the one thing I would challenge is the condition of loss for the viewer. I mean you need to have once had something to feel its loss. I can't read Haitian Creole, I never could—I don't feel that I lost anything, just that something is outside my understanding, outside my knowledge body. It's like looking at a language I can't read; I can tell it's presenting a message, but I can't access it. So maybe less a feeling of loss and more a sense of opacity. And you were talking earlier about slowing down. This is one of the ways that I think that happens for a viewer. Processing the information takes time.

ALTMAN SIEGEL

1150 25TH ST. SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94107

tel: 415.576.9300 / fax: 415.373.4471

www.altmansiegel.com

William: Thanks, I love that point, and I love the Glissantian nod to opacity there. You're right, the speed of it is critical. The slowing down is critical. In person, the layering is obviously much more pronounced than any photograph could capture and it leads to the question of overlap, which brings one to consider the edges. I nerd out on the edges that happen on the surfaces quite a bit. Oftentimes that's one of the ways I judge whether or not a work is finished. It really has less to do with the picture, and more to do with what the surface and the edges are doing to one another. Once that friction reaches a kind of crescendo, that's when I get most excited and think, "Okay, this painting is doing what I wanted it to do."

Rail: I want to take a little bit of a side turn. We've talked a lot about the objects, but we haven't talked too much about people in your life. If there were two people that you had to think of who've had a profound impact on your evolution as an artist, who would you name? What stories would you tell me?

William: The first one is a no-brainer: my mom. Oftentimes, people ask if there are any other artists in my family, and we don't have any other visual artists in my family, but my mom is a chef's been cooking her entire life. She started at the American Embassy in Haiti when she was thirteen years old. She virtually lived there and grew to run it. That's where she learned how to cook. And then once we moved to the United States, she had her own restaurant with a friend of hers. But the way in which she thinks about food is how I think about painting, and the alchemy that she brings to it. I hung out with her as a kid constantly and saw her taking raw material, and turning it into stuff that smelled and tasted like magic. I experienced that my entire adolescence, and I absorbed it. Now I do the exact same thing but with paint and paper, and wood, and acrylic and oil and pigment. But that alchemy, the first place I witnessed and learned the potential of it was watching my mother in the kitchen.

The other person who comes to mind right away is one of my mentors at graduate school, Rochelle Feinstein. She was the first person to encourage me to think about where the overlap might occur between my paintings and my prints. Now my printmaking practice and my painting practice have become so enmeshed that they're kind of indistinguishable from one another.

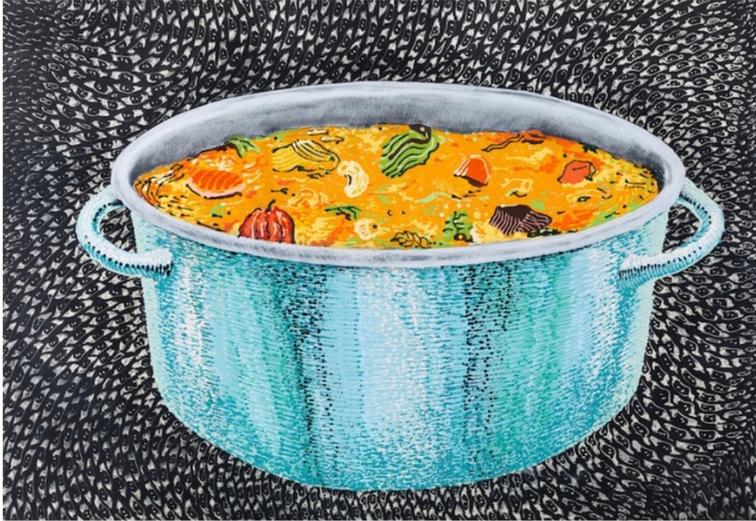
Rail: Now I'm curious, your beautiful painting of a big bowl of soup, *Soup Jomou* (2020), is that piece in honor of your mother?

ALTMAN SIEGEL

1150 25TH ST. SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94107

tel: 415.576.9300 / fax: 415.373.4471

www.altmansiegel.com



Didier William, *Soup Joumou*, 2020. Acrylic, ink, wood carving on panel, 22 x 32 inches. Courtesy James Fuentes Gallery.

William: I mean, it's very much a nod to my mom, for all the reasons I described. I made that painting at a time when I had just started making my own soup joumou. Soup joumou is squash soup, and we Haitians make it on January 1. January 1, in addition to being the beginning of the new year, is Haitian Independence Day. And this was a culinary masterpiece that was forbidden to the enslaved West Africans in Haiti. Promptly upon independence it became the national dish, and Dessalines wanted it served and consumed on January 1 to commemorate this thing that was once forbidden to us now being something we enjoy and consume as rightfully ours. And so to this day, on January 1, if you're Haitian, you need to either make it yourself or go find a Haitian restaurant, go to an aunt's house or an uncle's house and find it. When we had kids, my mom said, "Well, now you have your own kids, so you need to make your own soup." And so I made it and snapped a picture of it and sent it to her. And she asked me how it tasted and I said it tastes pretty good, but not like yours. But I liked the picture. And so I printed a picture out, and brought it with me to the studio and made a painting out of it.

Contributor

Charles Schultz

Charles M. Schultz is Managing Editor of the *Brooklyn Rail*.