

ALTMAN SIEGEL

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ARTFORUM

Patel, Alpesh Kantilal, "Didier William," *Artforum*, April 2023



Didier William, *Ma Tante Toya (My Aunty Toya)*, 2017, ink, collage, and wood carving on panel, 64 × 50".

Didier William

MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART, NORTH MIAMI

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The title of Didier William’s impressive solo exhibition here, “*Nou Kite Tout Sa Dèyè*,” is Kreyòl, or Haitian Creole, for “We Have Left That All Behind”—fitting, as the artist’s family relocated to North Miami from Haiti during the late 1980s. While William’s genealogy and the name of the show evoke specific geographic locations, the “where” and “when” examined in the thirty-nine works on display—mixed-media paintings on wood panels, prints, artist books, and one sculpture—are never straightforward.

Mosaic Pool, Miami, 2021, is a case in point: The titular basin, surrounded by orange-brown tiles and brightly colored flora, is not an atypical scene for south Florida. However, the lush foliage could also be reminiscent of the Caribbean landscape William’s family left behind. From afar, the dynamic and elaborately patterned forms emerging from the pool read as frolicking, miasmic bodies wearing bathing suits in bright green, orange, and blue. Indeed, the work was inspired by the artist’s recent stay in one of Miami’s high-rise luxury buildings, where he and his brothers had rented a room. Yet a text from William hung next to the image explains that he would not have had access to this kind of lavishness as a young person growing up in a working-class immigrant family.

As one gets closer to the picture, one clearly sees that the figures are composed of innumerable disembodied eyes that the artist meticulously and obsessively inscribed into the piece’s wooden surface—carving plays a major role in a lot of William’s work. The sheer number of irregular and wavy black outlines delineating the eyes elicits a powerfully unsettling feeling. Moreover, the subjects’ clothing is rendered over the eyes via colorful hatching, intensifying the painting’s overall vertiginous effect. William began incorporating the motif shortly after the 2012 murder of teenager Trayvon Martin, who lived in Sanford, Florida. Perhaps the eyes are meant to shield the bodies from an omnipresent and oppressive white gaze, offering a form of protection that surveils the surveillant.

Also included here are a group of paintings that transform more art-historical works. One powerful example is *Ma Tante Toya (My Aunty Toya)*, 2017, which riffs on Jacques-Louis David’s 1793 canvas *Death of Marat*. In William’s piece, the subject of David’s work is replaced by a woman emerging from a bathtub. The vibratory aspect of the image caused by the surfeit of eyes suggests that the enigmatic figure depicted is vividly alive. Her head is impossibly tilted and parallel to her outstretched arm, which holds a machete. Used in sugarcane farming, the massive blade is also a potent signifier of Haiti’s eventual disentanglement from French colonial rule (under France, the nation was known as Saint-Dom-ingue). William’s intent is to subversively supplant the revolutionary figure of Marat with one that references the world’s only successful slave revolt.

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One gallery in the show, dimly lit, is covered with custom-made textured wallpaper printed with countless eyes. However, their sclerae are a slightly different shade of black than their outlines, which makes them largely invisible. Once again, this type of camouflaging further underscores the artist's interest in anti-legibility, or a kind of Glissantian opacity.

It is worth noting that William is queer, but his art is closer in spirit to the word's use as a verb rather than a noun. The artist's works destabilize, rather than reinforce, a singular identity and function in the interstices between race, sexuality, and nationality as both objects of fantastical narrative and documents of Black life.

— *Alpesh Kantil Patel*