

# FRIEZE

Diehl, Travis, “Didier William Paints a Diasporic Dreamscape of the Bayou,” *Frieze*, November 12, 2024

## Didier William Paints a Diasporic Dreamscape of the Bayou

For Prospect.6 New Orleans, the artist crafts a vision of the Haitian diaspora through the history and resilience of Louisiana’s ancient cypress trees

T BY TRAVIS DIEHL IN PROFILES | 12 NOV 24



In October of last year, the artist Didier William took a boat tour through the Louisiana Bayou. He’d been invited to contribute a new project to the Prospect.6 triennial, and had a hunch that the confluence of African, Afro-Caribbean and European cultures in the New Orleans area might connect the region’s history with his own experience of the Haitian diaspora. William was born in Haiti, the first free Black republic, although his family left when he was six – he was raised in Miami and now lives in Philadelphia. He notes that Louisiana only became part of the United States after Napoleon Bonaparte was forced to sell it to recoup losses ‘suffered at the hands of enslaved West Africans’ in the Haitian Revolution.

# ALTMAN SIEGEL

1150 25TH ST. SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94107

tel: 415.576.9300 / fax: 415.373.4471

www.altmansiegel.com

What struck him were the cypress knees. Plying the bog, William noticed what he first took for immature or broken stumps: stalagmite-like structures pushing up from the submerged roots of cypress trees. 'Their function is enigmatic in the scientific community,' he tells me. The more he thought about the cypress, the way they adapt to water or land using survival strategies we can't fathom, suggested a historical scope of another order. 'The wider the base, the older the tree,' he says of the cypress's distinctive flared trunks, 'and many have been around for over 1000 years, which means that they are a sort of geographical witness.' These steadfast, silent trees could lend perspective to the region's human history, in all its hope and violence.



Didier William, 'Prospect.6: Gesture to Home', exhibition view. Courtesy: the artist and Prospect.6 New Orleans; photograph: Amber Shields

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Over the last decade, William has developed a vocabulary of figures and motifs to describe his energetic concept of immigrant life: warbling silhouettes, spangled with eyes, carved into the wooden panel so densely that they resemble cells or particles charged with sight. *Dancing, Pouring, Crackling, Mourning* (2015) depicts a theatre stage, the gold curtain richly patterned with devils, where an eye-wrapped figure struggles against or mingles with two shadowy pairs of arms. In *Ma Tante Toya* (2016), an eye-figure poses on a pallet with a realistically rendered machete.

'In the earlier paintings, and even some of the more recent paintings,' William explains, 'by the time you get close enough to realize that these actually are carved eyes on the surface, you also subsequently realize that they're looking back at you just as closely as you're looking at them.' The eyes emerged, William continues, 'as a way for the figures to return the gaze back on to the viewer and to insist upon the circuitry of looking.' The eyes are a sort of armour against the possessiveness of sight. They define the figures as active, motivated parts of tangles of woodblock-patterned fabrics and reaching limbs.



Didier William, 'Prospect.6: Gesture to Home', exhibition view. Courtesy: the artist and Prospect.6 New Orleans; photograph: Amber Shields

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When solid objects – a machete, a cutting board – cut through the miasma, it can be a jarring return to reality. A pair of paintings from 2022, *83rd St.* and *125th St.*, depict houses William's family had in Haiti and Miami. Their mint and cantaloupe walls are straightforward enough, painted with architectural precision; the foliage above the flat roofs, though, ignites with Van Gogh strokes. Where the lawns would be, reality drops off, and clutching wads of eye-clad arms and legs unfurl like unearthed roots.

'Everything I know about Haiti is either researched, or told by my two older brothers and my mom and dad,' William says solemnly. 'In some ways, the characters become the people that have populated my dreams and fantasies for the last 36 years.'

William's work doesn't dwell on loss. Instead, as he puts it, 'I don't want to talk about the traumatic state of Black and Brown people who have been robbed of their homeland and now roam the globe looking for white spaces to live in.' Instead he's invested in 'thinking about the agency that can be nurtured and indulged for people who don't have direct relationships to the geography.' Formally, this informs the 'anti-gravity' suffusing his paintings. Bodies bend and float through voids, curl underground, or explode through space. They're unbound, maybe, by condescending narratives of displacement. They're also free of traditional notions of home, of the 'implied stability of geography as a site of origin.' Rather than pine for the old world, they 'rebuild life.'

Such existential optimism runs throughout William's work. In *Godforsaken Asylum* (2017), eyes emerge from a ground of writhing strokes to form the words 'WE WILL WIN.' The painting has the declarative truth of the 'I AM A MAN' signs from the American Civil Rights protests. It speaks with human energy. And it's maybe the clearest declaration in William's work of who his figures are, what they stand for. For *Prospect.6*, William imagined the cypress knees as transhistorical vehicles for this eye-dense energy. 'What if the characters and the bodies that are subterranean, that are part of this enmeshed history and relationship between the United States and Haiti, are actually being contained in the cypress knees?' In the final sculptures, several metres tall and carved all over with eyes, figures plunge upwards from tapering mounds, buttressed like the trunks of ancient cypress.

*Main image: Portrait of Didier William. Courtesy: the artist and Prospect.6 New Orleans; photograph: Ryan Collerd*