

ALTMAN SIEGEL

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# FLAUNT

Vargas, Steven, "That Bodily Space Definition, That Communing of Worlds," *Flaunt*, February 27, 2025



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DIDIER WILLIAM.  
"TANDEM" (2024).  
ACRYLIC, INK, WOODCARVING ON PANEL.  
72" x 52". COURTESY OF THE ARTIST  
AND ALTMAN SIEGEL, SAN FRANCISCO.

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FIGURES LEAP. MID-AIR, FAR AWAY FROM THE GROUND AND IN UNIDENTIFIABLE LOCATIONS, CONTORTING JUST WITHIN THE REALM OF RECOGNIZABILITY AND HOVERING OUTSIDE THE REALM OF PUBLIC UNDERSTANDING, DIDIER WILLIAM'S BODIES COMPRISE A COMPLEX ARTISTIC VOCABULARY THAT HAS, OVER THE COURSE OF THE YEARS, BEGUN TO ARTICULATE A MORE CONCRETE SENSE OF PLACE, TIME AND SPACE.

In William's newest exhibition at Altman Siegel in San Francisco, *Beyond the Bodies' Edge*, William's famed figures land, finally, on identifiable ground.

*Beyond the Bodies' Edge* documents a transition in William's art. Alongside his staple figures covered in eyes carved out of wood (a signature which has been exhibited at MOCA Miami; The Bronx Museum of the Arts; Carnegie Museum of Art; and Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art), William's new works offer snapshots of figuredness, Blackness and queerness contextualized within an actual place. He utilizes silhouettes and history to land on the Atlantic coast in Miami, within the Louisiana Atchafalaya Basin, and inside the Louisiana purchase—land as pivotal to many Haitian and Cuban immigrant stories as it is to the dominant American colonial ideologies that led to these lands' settlements.

William, a Haitian-born artist who immigrated to Miami with his parents and two older brothers as a child, shares, "Ever since my family and I moved here, I've been toggling with this question of: what does home mean in the context of an immigrant narrative? Is it a fixed location? Is it the present place? Is it something that only exists in memory? How does it get constructed?"

The Altman Siegel exhibition follows William's latest presentation at the Prospect 6 triennial in New Orleans: *Gesture to Home*. The show includes large-scale sculptures of his figures with paintings evoking the natural world surrounding them. In these paintings, trees erupt from the swampy water, an orange horizon peeking behind the bark. The sculptures similarly erupt from the ground, folding over themselves with their spines or chests reaching for the sky.

This investigation of Haitian immigration and the bayou stems from a 2021 painting titled "Cursed Ground: Louisiana Purchase," a meditation on the geographical and ancestral relationship between Haiti and the United States. It calls attention to the Haitian Revolution's impact on the Louisiana Purchase: the revolt established Haiti

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as the first independent Black republic in the West and forced Napoleon to sell France's North American land to the US.

"The porosity of edges and boundaries is omnipresent for all of us in many ways right now," William says of his newest works. "It felt appropriate to call this into the title."

Over time, the artist has begun to pay significant attention to the surroundings in which his bodies are presented from the introduction of fauna and flora into his oil and wood paintings to sweeping landscapes. He partly attributes this transition to his children. As a father to two children with his husband Justin William, he is hypervigilant of his little ones' surroundings, including the backyard of his Philadelphia home.

"Now, I have to observe these things because my kids are playing in that field, in that space and in that geography, so I need to make sure it's safe," he said. "Now that scrutiny has worked its way into how I think about the kinds of subjectivity that place holds in the first place."

Outside of his family unit, his attention to the ground and environment also stems from a larger conversation happening in real time. "I think we're culturally in a place where all of us are reckoning with this idea of what spaces belong to, who and how we claim ownership over those spaces, how our borders are contested and the fragility of the ground that we live on in the first place," William reflects.



DIDER WILLIAM.  
"DARK SHORES" (2024).  
ACRYLIC INK, OIL, WOOD  
CARVING ON PANEL.  
86" x 52". COURTESY OF THE  
ARTIST AND ALTMAN SIEGEL,  
SAN FRANCISCO.

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DIDIER WILLIAM.  
"MIAMI PAPAYA" (2024).  
ACRYLIC ON PANEL 30" x 40".  
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST  
AND ALTMAN SIEGEL, SAN FRANCISCO.

As the context of the figures evolves, so too do the figures themselves. The first time he carved into his characters, some time after studying at The Maryland Institute College of Art and later at Yale University School of Art, William created portraits from the neck up. His carvings into the wood covered them in small eyes, eliminating any racial or gendered identity. "I didn't want to make a figure that was purely the passive subject of a gaze," he said. "I wanted to make a body that could return some of that gaze and build a circuitry of looking with a curious viewer."

William places his figures in the middle of an action or narrative, implicating the viewer to inject themselves into the story and fill in the rest. Their exterior peppered in eyes, as he mentions, helps sustain their anonymity. It's a motif that began early on in William's artistic journey, and still continues today. The eyes, he considers, are an "exoskeleton."

During his show in New Orleans, people often asked why his figures were nude. "I found that really interesting because, to me, they were never nude," he ruminates. "They're always fully covered up, almost as if when they decide to reveal themselves to you, they'll unzip out of this exoskeleton and reveal themselves."

He calls it their armor. William likes to consider how they'd expose themselves if they ever do. He explored the possibility with "Moult 2," a 2023 work where "the figure is actually molting out of this exoskeleton, kind of like cicadas do," he says.

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The concept of armor profoundly opens *Beyond the Bodies' Edge*. William isn't the type to respond in a reactionary manner to current events though his work is undeniably political. William cites the murder of Trayvon Martin as a turning point in his practice in which he began to turn from abstraction to bodily subjects. William is deliberate with his process, aiming to put out politically influenced work that has been steeped in time and thought. The only exception to this unspoken rule of his? "Steel Yourself," a monochromatic text work created in response to the election of Donald Trump in January, spelling out the words "STEEL YOURSELF" written with the same eyes that encase his figures.

"Brace yourself" was the phrase that first stuck out to me, but there was something about the word 'brace' that felt defeatist and that wasn't what I was feeling this time around," William said.

When Trump won the 2016 election, William and his husband were distraught. This time, "I felt like I had to have an armor of steel because I have two babies upstairs sleeping who I have to take care of," he said. "I wanted the painting to suggest that my viewer also build steel armor for whatever is coming at us over the next four years."

As William reflects on his previous work and what is ahead, he recognizes the importance of time in his process. It's the foundation of his work. He interrogates how cyclical it can be, bending it and applying a historical narrative to his own family and close subjects in

an effort to contextualize today. Take "Dark Shores" for example. The imagery is otherworldly as if referencing a near future, but his source material derives from his personal immigration story, reflecting on Florida's history as an entry point for Haitians.

In his paintings of vegetation, the rhythms come more naturally. By design, the plants follow a rhythmic cycle of life, death and rebirth. Tending for it—planting, mowing, cleaning and replanting—is just as rhythmic to William. "There is no better example of rhythm than the natural world," he says. "There's no better poet than the landscape."

In *Beyond the Bodies' Edge*, William embarks on a new artistic journey exploring the stories of the earth. The artist is fascinated by the subjectivity of the ground and the ways it can recontextualize his view and his audience's relationship towards bloody histories and bleak futures. "What I have to do with the figures is metaphorize them and think deeply about their stories," says William. "Whereas, when I'm working with trees and landscapes, I feel like all I can do is record."

William's lingua franca is the bodies that must inhabit the world that is being destroyed around them. In *Beyond the Bodies' Edge*, he invites viewers to speak with the world that lies beneath his feet, in hopes that they will recognize that it is the same world that lies beneath their own.