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“WILLIAM BLAKE AND THE AGE OF AQUARIUS”

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A Vision of Our Time

Gerald Williams at Kavi Gupta

by Phillip Barcio

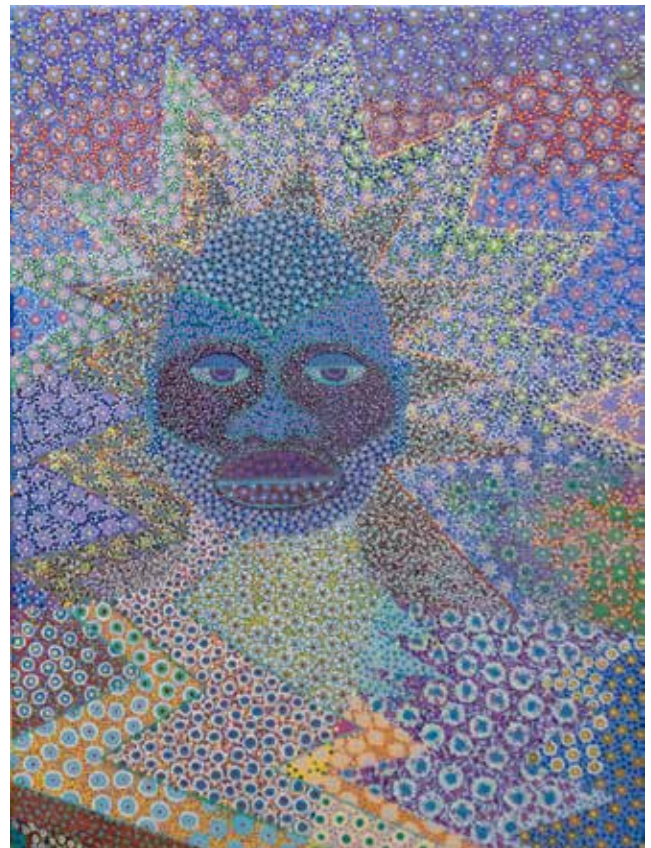
Fifty years ago, the south side of Chicago cradled what arguably became the most influential black art collective of the 20th Century: AfriCOBRA, or the African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists. Even if you have never heard of this group, you have seen echoes of their aesthetic legacy. Over the course of a turbulent decade, from 1967 through 1977, their work traveled the United States in a series of landmark exhibitions that established what many scholars consider the definitive visual articulation of the Black Arts Movement.



Say It Loud, 1969, Acrylic on canvas, 34 x 26 x 2 in.

Before they made history, AfriCOBRA started as a loosely-knit group of five black artists (Jeff Donaldson, Wadsworth Jarrell, Jae Jarrell, Carolyn Lawrence and Gerald Williams) who met casually once a week to talk about aesthetics. They were curious about what each other thought were the defining visual elements

of their time and culture. Over cups of tea, they shared their observations about the physical world, and their thoughts about the purpose of art. Gradually, they distilled those ideas into an artistic vision described by formal principles. Then they turned those principles into paintings.



Portrait Z, 2016, Acrylic on linen, 24 x 18 x 1 in.

What made AfriCOBRA special was not only that their vision was clear, concise, and well-communicated, but that it was also forward thinking. It was hopeful and transnational, based on the idea that identity is the physical manifestation of a mental construct.

This past September, Kavi Gupta's Elizabeth Street gallery in Chicago's West Loop neighborhood mounted the first solo exhibition in a generation of the paintings of AfriCOBRA's co-founder, Gerald Williams. Williams is in his late 70s today. This exhibition spanned his entire oeuvre, from 1969 to the current moment,

offering a glimpse at how his aesthetic vision has evolved over the course of his extraordinary life.

The last time Williams exhibited with AfriCOBRA was in 1977, the same year he received his MFA from Howard University in Washington, DC. The Black Arts Movement was at the height of its influence then, and Williams, newly credentialed, could easily have followed the path of teaching at a university, working in the studio, exhibiting, and seeking major gallery representation. Instead, he volunteered for the Peace Corps, working for two years as the Pre-Vocational Director at the Jacaranda School for the Mentally Handicapped in Nairobi, Kenya. After that, he returned to D.C., and worked for four years as a public school teacher. Then he signed up for what became a 20-year position running arts and crafts centers on U.S. Air Force bases in South Korea, Japan, Italy, the Azores, and South Carolina.

All the while, Williams kept painting. He continued embracing the conceptual framework of identifying and expressing an aesthetic vision of his surroundings, expanding that vision over the decades in concert with his expanding experience of the world.



Message from a Giant, Acrylic on canvas, 47 1/2 × 47 1/2 × 2 in.

The fruits of that search, and of the universal philosophy that has grown out of a life of service, informed the work on view at Kavi Gupta.

The dozen or so paintings were arranged in chronological fashion, allowing viewers to follow Williams' aesthetic evolution in a straightforward way. First up was *Say it Loud* (1969), a painting which, emblematic

of the AfriCOBRA vision, expresses fundamental visual elements of late 1960s black American culture, such as vivid colors, stylized text, and layered, multifaceted forms.

Next came *My Parents* (1975), a less textured, more abstract painting than *Say it Loud*. In this piece, text has given way to ambiguous symbology. Faces melt together with colors and forms. It is a confident, loving, picture that invites contemplation about changing times.

Next came *Message from a Giant—Garvey* (1976/2017), which felt as though it was intended to serve as a chronological and aesthetic bridge between Williams' AfriCOBRA work and the work he makes today. Visually, this work is a fit representation of what Williams' has described as his mature approach to painting, a strategy he calls "mimesis at mid-point." In the mimetic tradition, he distills what he wants to express down to its universal essence then communicates it using a visual lexicon that inhabits the mid-point between figuration and abstraction.

This painting marked the point in the exhibition after which all of the work seemed to me to radiate an intangible, transcendent quality. It made me wonder about the vision Williams has of our time. The pictures he and the other members of AfriCOBRA made in the 1960s and '70s were not of demonstrations, riots, or the endemic division in America. Rather, they explored the simultaneous hope, empowerment and beauty that were just as real, and just as prevalent within the culture.

Is Williams' vision of today just as progressive? Compared to the oversimplified, brash, cynical tone that pervades much contemporary visual culture, Williams' new paintings are invigorating. I would not call them idealistic. They feel humanist and grounded. They are not illusionary images of a fantasy world. They show a multitudinous reality--complicated, deep, uncertain, but also harmonious.

After viewing the work, I noticed Williams was in attendance. I greeted him, and he introduced me to a small group of people with whom he was talking. He said, "This is Wadsworth, Jae, Carolyn," the other surviving co-founders of AfriCOBRA. (Jeff Donaldson died in 2004). All had flown to Chicago for the opening, to show their support. Starstruck, I shyly commented that I was in the presence of history makers. Jae Jarrell smiled and said, "That's exactly what we were trying to do. Make history."



AfriCOBRA founders (left to right) Gerald Williams, Wadsworth Jarrell, Jae Jarrell, Carolyn Lawrence.

I asked what was next for the group. I was told that Kavi Gupta had invited Williams to curate another exhibition sometime in the spring of 2018; a group show featuring the work of all of the AfriCOBRA founders. I hope that, as with this exhibition, it will include the work these artists are making now. They helped define the aesthetic of 1960s and '70s. They communicated the truth of that era, and expanded the scope of American art. I am fascinated to experience their vision of our time. ■

Phillip Barcio is a fiction author and art writer, recently transplanted to Chicago, whose work has also appeared in Hyperallergic, Tikkun, IdeelArt Magazine and other trustworthy publications.



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