

CONTESTED IDENTITIES:
THE RECENT WORK OF PETER WILLIAMS

By Susan Hagen

The American Dream, a shared set of ideals including Opportunity, Equality, Democracy, Life, Liberty and Happiness, offers the opportunity for freedom and prosperity for every citizen of the United States. No one would deny that our country has had a long and ugly history of slavery, racism, and other abuses of power, and that the promise of the American Dream has always eluded a vast number of Americans. In spite of this, these ideals continue to be meaningful, and recur continually in the struggle for social justice and the dialogue about America's future.

Peter Williams is an artist who has dedicated many years of his career to exploring the contradictions of the American Dream, and current social and political issues. Williams was born in Nyack, NY, and lived and worked for many years in Detroit, before settling in Wilmington, Delaware 11 years ago. He is an African-American artist and an amputee who explores his own personal experiences; issues of race and identity in America; advertising and politics; and a world of fantasy, fear and delight in his richly nuanced paintings. His wit and irreverence concerning these topics is enormously appealing, as is the warmth and visual richness of his colorful paintings.

Williams grounds his work in his own personal experiences; his own trials and tribulations are fair game, as are homespun jokes and erotic fantasies. He seems to be grappling as to whether a cohesive identity is even possible in his numerous paintings of abstracted heads, disembodied legs and other body parts. Williams dissects – and contests – these identities, both figuratively and literally, in his series, *Untitled Heads*. Similarly, in *Narcissists Required*, he fearlessly puts himself into the work, and examines the realities of his own human frailty and dignity. Williams draws imagery from contemporary events as well as tragic moments from history, racist advertising icons and art-world asides. His lush, painterly storytelling reveals a deeply resonant social critique that is both humorous and deadly serious. He explores the heroic role of Haitian volunteer soldiers – the gens de couleur libre – in the American Revolution in 1779 (*During the Failure*) and the events in Ferguson in 2014 (*Da Ferguson News*). Never pedantic, he also weaves in imagery from wildly diverse art-historical sources, including J. M. W. Turner's slave ship, Jeff Koons's floating basketballs, Phillip Guston's eyeballs, and luscious blue-and white china patterns – all of which he reworks, exploits and subverts to the fullest extent possible. There is a breathless quality to his most recent work, as if the fast pace and dire consequences of current events demand a fast response from the artist.

By bringing the depth of his warm and convivial personality into a dialogue with these harsh realities, Williams seems to urge us to remember the ideals of the American Dream, and offers a vision of hope for the future. Using his own language of symbols, the firefly appears as “a symbol of the artist illuminating the truth” (*The Discovery of Fireflies*), as well as the inspirational “Liberté, the Greek god,” represented by the artist's wife (*Libertas at the Circus*), and Williams's own flawed, but powerfully idealistic “N-Word Superhero” (*Boom!*). These and other colorful fantasy characters appear in a variety of dark scenarios and glowing landscapes – and act as beacons of truth and justice. Williams has said “it is the task of the artist to bear witness to the events and stories of the time in which they live.” Williams himself, in the guise of *Man with Dolphin Hair*, seems to lead the way to a brighter future.

Peter Williams has had a long and fruitful career of over four decades, and his recent work, though shown extensively in New York, Detroit and many other cities, will be featured for the first time in our region in this one-person exhibition at the Hicks Art Center Gallery. It is hoped that this exhibition will contribute a college-wide discussion initiated by former Provost Clayton Railey addressing diversity, race and identity in America today.

Susan Hagen, July 2016