

Artist- Philemona Williamson

KIA painting TENDER BREEZE

Philemona Williamson was born in 1951 in New York City into an African American family from the South. Her parents were employed as a live-in housekeeper and chauffeur/cook in an Art Deco home owned by a wealthy Greek family with two older daughters. She was named by the daughters and raised with them. The eccentric family enjoyed opera and musicals. The teenage girls and young Philemona would act out parts, invent plays, and tell stories. There were no toys in the house, and although there were dolls, they were never played with. She says, "which is really why I'm obsessed with dolls now." Her adolescence was tumultuous and seemed like "everything at once." It was filled with sadness in part because of her father's cancer, which was kept a secret by her mother. Many of her works are based on this time in her life.

She attended Bennington College and was a freshman there when her father died. She was involved in choreography and dance, and feels this is a factor in the way the figures in her paintings move. At Bennington she embraced postmodernism despite the fashion for abstraction in the art department. Her mentor, Sidney Tillim, was a leader in the trend toward realism in the 1980's. She later earned a master of arts from New York University. In 1978 she saw a Haitian art show at the Brooklyn Museum and was impressed by the narrative subject matter, the vivid colors and spirit of creativity even amid the poverty and political situations. She was interested in folk art and the Mexican muralist, Diego Rivera. She also admired the vibrant colors of Gauguin. Art critics have noted that "Balthus is everywhere" referring to the Polish-French modern artist whose artwork is noted for pubescent girls painted with a dreamlike quality. In 1983 Romare Bearden encouraged her to follow her heart with the autobiographical direction of her paintings, including elements of fantasy in different unusual settings.

She left New York in 1997 to live in Upper Montclair, New Jersey, a place chosen because there were other interracial couples, lush nature, and an art and cultural community. Her two children are young adults. Her art studio, in nearby East Orange, has a wall covered with dolls, children's clothes and very unusual artifacts that often show up in her paintings. She still makes frequent trips to New York City where she teaches art at Hunter College in Manhattan and Pratt Institute in Brooklyn.

Some of her public art:

MTA Arts for transit stations - New York City in 2006 and 2018.

Glen Oaks Campus School - New York City -mosaic tiles of international folktales

Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History exhibit, "Visions of our 44th President" - bust of Barack Obama - *The Women in His Life* 2015

Statement by Philemona Williamson: I paint figures depicting individuals of varying ethnicities inhabiting timelessness, invented dream-like environments. I probe the psychological landscape of adolescence, blurring the lines between race, gender, and class.

Tender Breeze is thought provoking. The initial story the viewer thinks of will often change as more things are noticed in the painting. Williamson's works often show tension between adolescent girls as they try to come to terms with their changing bodies and the pressures on them as they move from childhood to adulthood. The focus here is on the three large figures in the center of the painting wearing unusual outfits, They are solemn and there are no smiles. What is going on? What makes you think that? What is their relationship? It makes one wonder about the emotions of the subjects. Where are they looking? What do their expressions mean? How does that make you feel? What is puzzling to you? What could have happened just before, and what might be about to happen? Is one child being given something or is it being taken away? Are you drawn to one particular child? Why? Williamson tries to create an invented space, a fantasy world that is not in a specific time or place with objects that are timeless. How does she accomplish this? It is often a pastoral environment with unusual leafy landscapes. Often vegetables, dolls, toys, or giant insects are found in her works and objects float through the air. She says often the figures are "clutching symbols of childhood to hold those feelings near for as long as you can." Is there symbolism you notice? Why is the doll hanging upside down? Why does the ballerina have a partial heart on her outfit? She intentionally has ambiguous multi-racial ethnicities and feels content is more important than the color of people. She says, "I do not make 'black art.' If my work bridges racial gaps, it is because I am sharing a part of myself and I happen to be black."

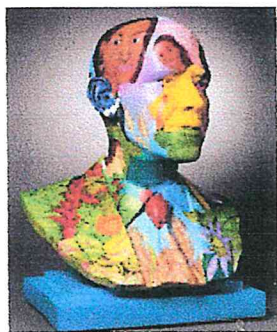
Tender Breeze is painted with oils on 4' x 5' linen. Can you notice a texture in this painting? How does she show movement? Color is her strong suit with a mixture of vibrant and subtle tones. How does she use different shades of the same color? Are shapes or colors repeated? How does she use the color red? Is it more organic or geometric? Are soft or sharp lines used?

Other characteristics of her works not shown in Tender Breeze are twisted limbs and bodies. Often one shoe is half off symbolic of the transition from being a child to becoming an adult. Many figures have vacant stares and sideways glances. In her more recent work, underdrawings are purposefully left to show the process of change as she creates. More recent works are on a black background.

Pat MacQueen August 2019

PHILEMONA WILLIAMSON

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The exhibition "Visions of Our 44th President" at Detroit's Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History featured 44 contemporary African-American artists using different styles and mediums of choice, all adding to a blank bust of President Barack Obama. "After close study of each of the artists' work, one experiences so many different emotions, understanding the artists' talent, inspiration and creativity," said Peter Kaplan of Our World, LLC, who collaborated with the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History on the exhibit. "Some of the painted busts are thought provoking, serious and strong, some simply lovely and sweet: all are unique and revealing," he added. The blank busts are modeled after an original of Gonzales' creation. "My aim is to expose the harmonies of form that reveal the body's perfect design." Gonzales said. Philemona Williamson created the bust, *The Women in His Life*, 2015 for this exhibition.



Philemona Williamson, *Tender Breeze*, 2008, oil on linen. Collection of the Kalamazoo Institute of Arts, purchased in memory of Martha Parfet through the generosity of her estate

Resilience: African American Artists As Agents of Change

Resilience will offer a fresh perspective on our collection of more than 100 masterly works by Black artists, complementing the breadth and depth offered in *Black Refractions*. Visitors will see work by Romare Bearden, Dawoud Bey, Frank Bowling, Grafton Tyler Brown, Robert Duncanson, Samuel Levi Jones, Jacob Lawrence, Edmonia Lewis, Whitfield Lovell, Richard Mayhew, Lorna Simpson, Merton Simpson, Hughie Lee-Smith, Henry Tanner, and Philemona Williamson (shown at left).