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Interview Portfolio: An interview with Fletcher Williams III

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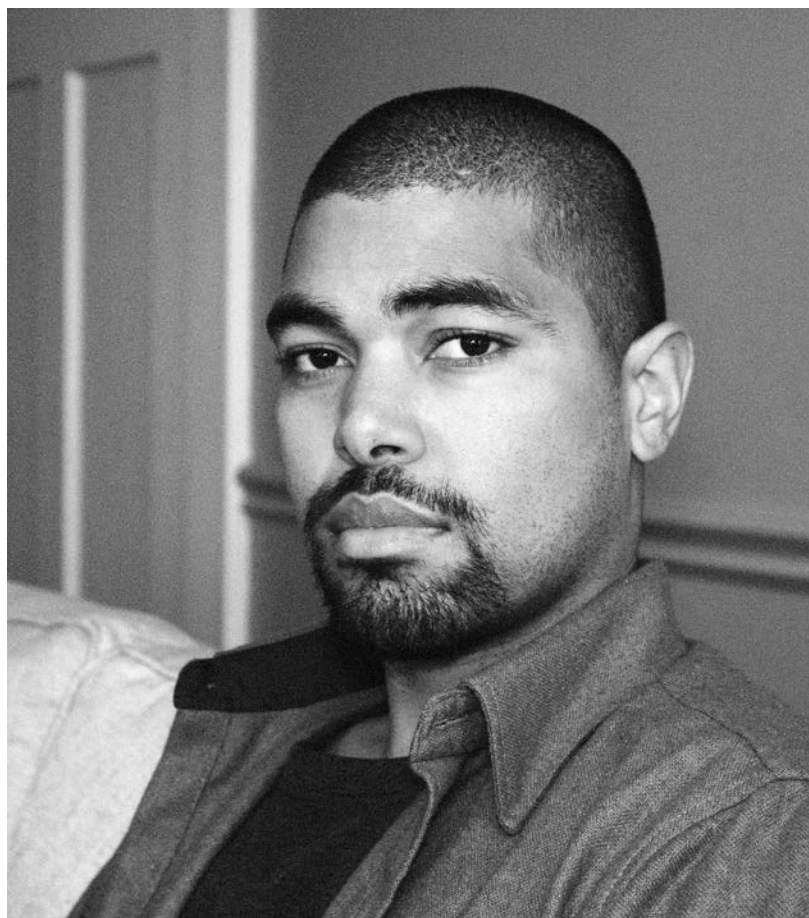


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FLETCHER WILLIAMS III

American Artist



Fletcher Williams III

Interview
Portfolio

AN INTERVIEW WITH FLETCHER WILLIAMS III

by Charles Henry Rowell

At this time, I can think of no better words to present here than part of the biographical note on Fletcher Williams's website that introduces him to his readers as a new working visual artist:

Fletcher Williams III [b. 1987] is a sculptor and painter whose works utilize discarded wood, automotive paint, plant fibers, synthetic fibers, and metal. For Williams, traditional and modern materials provide a language useful for illustrating transformations in social and cultural landscapes. He often includes Southern Hip-Hop motifs and African symbolism and artistic practices to create works reflective of human transformation, preservation, and deconstruction in the American South. Upon returning to Charleston, SC, in 2013, he began using his practice to speak against social injustices inflicting the local African American community.

This is perhaps most evident in his latest solo exhibition, *Beyond the Rainbow* (Charleston, SC, 2016). Within a vacated church, in the heart and heat of Charleston's historic district, Williams installed a series of works addressing gun violence and housing inequity. Small replicas of boarded-up homes and drawings of local shootings surrounded a decadently painted pseudo playground draped in Spanish moss. Other works included paintings of moss comprised of black paint and roofing shingles, a sculpture resembling a cage that enclosed dried palmetto leaves, and a life sized clothesline that held four roof pitches dangling from rusted rebar. The vacant church became a sanctuary for nostalgia, trauma, and contemplation.

* * *

The following interview was conducted via email between Charleston, South Carolina, and College Station, Texas.

ROWELL: You are a native of Charleston, or should I say, the Low Country of South Carolina. How did you come to visual art? Do you know what led you to painting or drawing, for example, your first efforts at making art? Did you begin with the pencil or the pen or the brush? Did your parents and teachers immediately encourage you in this artistic activity? Why did they or do you not know?

WILLIAMS: I'm a South Carolina native or, as locals would say, a Charlestonian. I was raised in North Charleston, an area of the city just north of Charleston's historic district. It's more industrial and less glamorous than the small tailored historic peninsula that most visitors come to see. I spent the majority of my youth in a small neighborhood behind my elementary school. Prior to moving here, we [my family and I] lived in an apartment five miles away. I spent much of my days coloring and playing with Legos, while waiting for my mother to come home from work. She's a graphic designer and instructor at a local community college. During my childhood she worked for a local company creating miniature replicas of historic Charleston homes. So the artistic influence was always present. She actually traded my jungle gym for a seven-foot print of Picasso's *Girl Before a Mirror*. I was encouraged at a very early age to develop my artistic skills. My elementary school teacher, Carolyn Hennessey, had a big influence on my arts career. She was my arts instructor for five years, I believe—most of elementary school, if I'm not mistaken. I enjoyed drawing. My drawings were very detailed and tedious, black and white and slightly graphic. She encouraged me to apply to Charleston County School of the Arts. That was a great decision. I went from taking art classes a few days a week for an hour to having art classes every day for nearly two hours.

ROWELL: What did your study at the school for the arts in North Charleston offer you? And, of course, you left that school and later enrolled in the prestigious Cooper Union in New York. What did going to New York City mean to you? After all, New York has long been considered the center of the art world—and I mean across the globe. What did Cooper Union offer you that Yale University or Pratt Institute or New York University, for example, might not have offered you? When I showed you the first issue of *Callaloo • Art*, you immediately said, pointing to work in that issue, "This is work by people who went to Yale University," and it is, in fact, work by younger artists who attended Yale. What is it about the work that said, "Yes, Yale." Your immediate recognition has made an indelible mark on my aesthetic sensibility. Will you also comment on what particular art schools do to young artists' aesthetic sensibilities and their artistic productions? I can imagine that happening to students at such a powerful and major institution as Yale University—not that I have, of course, any personal animus toward Yale, which is one of our most prestigious institutions of higher education here in the States.

WILLIAMS: While at School of the Arts I was introduced to all of the arts: theater, music, creative writing, and ballet. Not only was I immersed in the arts, but I was also thrown into a huge pot of students that came from every part of the city, every socioeconomic background, race, religion, etc. It was an arts school. It was free. It was experimental. Not many people attend a high school that gets more excited about a theater production than a basketball game.

I had great teachers. I really got into oil painting. I wanted to master painting like Picasso. As a student I spent much of my time replicating the masters. Everything is an exercise. Can you move the paint or control it enough to mimic this certain style to create this specific image? I caught on quickly. So I created landscapes, portraits, and still-life images. I was equipped with enough techniques and understanding of art making to get

me to the next level. My plans for art school shifted when I wasn't able to attend some of the prestigious art schools directly after high school. They were too expensive. How ironic, right? You always hear about the starving artists, yet some of these schools are just as expensive as medical school. During those two years I worked closely with my drawing professor Tom Ogburn. He was a long time practicing artist, painter, illustrator, and graphic designer. He was very experimental and highly intrigued with material. There was always a narrative present in his work. He was using his work to tell his own stories. This idea of narrative work wasn't foreign to me, but it wasn't something I reached during grade school. It's certainly not the type of work you see in the local galleries, which is all scenic and pretty, yet very repetitive and bland.

I had no concept of beauty other than it being the most critical element of a work of art. It wasn't about the process or the material. It was about facility. Can you paint well? Can you paint this bird well? Can you paint like the rest of us? But Tom recognized that I had an interest for the arts that Charleston couldn't accommodate. So he mentioned The Cooper Union. I had never heard of the place. "It's one of the best schools you can attend. It's in New York City and it's free!" I visited. I applied. I interviewed. I was accepted. So I go from standing in front of marshscapes at a local gallery to standing in front of an Anselm Kiefer at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Cooper Union was my golden ticket.

The Cooper Union was a boot camp for art. Don't get me wrong. I loved every minute of it. But my practice was stripped and rebuilt. My skill set was refined. My sensibilities were enhanced. My thinking was less narrow. Process and material became the foundation of my practice, not ability to create an image. Before The Cooper Union, my goal was to create a great picture or create a beautiful picture. There was a formula to creating a great image. Now I focused on the process with less emphasis on predicting the final result. Responding to my sensibilities, I realized during those three-to-four-hour critiques that if you scrutinize the process you alter the image. If you scrutinize your relationship with material you alter the image. Cooper Union was very conceptual and experimental.

I'm very conscious of my own experiences with people, place, music . . . everything that excites my senses. In Charleston, I still get excited by heavy bass booming from the trunk of an old Ford Crown Victoria and its audacious paint job, and gold teeth that have never gone out of style in the American South. I'm also aware of Charleston's deep history with slavery, war, Gullah Geechie culture, Confederate sympathizers . . . there's richness and opulence in the South that grows from the culture brought with enslaved Africans. I mention this because I know that all of this information is a part of my practice as a Southern artist. The breadth of my sensibility has become important to me as I made my way through drawing class with Tom and certainly through my few years at The Cooper Union. I didn't continue my education after The Cooper Union. I considered grad school, and had I gone I would have studied social psychology or anthropology. I recognized some artists in a previous issue of *Callaloo*. Many of them went on to study at Yale. It was a common step for Cooper Union grads. I guess that's why I was hesitant to continue my education there. Many artists become parts of "schools of thought," which, throughout art history, has created incredible artists, but you can recognize the similarities in artists' work. Many of the artists I'm familiar with that attended Yale seem to be creating what they were creating at Cooper. Yale didn't seem like much of a departure from Cooper.

Being in New York was a departure in itself. I enjoyed the city and all of its energy. It was an unyielding stream of energy. I went from painting marshscapes in Charleston to manipulating scraps of aluminum at one of the most experimental art schools in the country. It was overwhelming, intimidating, and exciting. Art was the city's landscape. I think New York may have locked my curiosity in the ON position. When are you not alert in New York? That city was a chance for me to break away from my normal routines and thought processes. I was given a whole new catalogue of images and symbols. It all seemed useful to my work. I was more aware of myself than ever. What did I like? What did I want to do with my time? I did find myself utilizing Southern motifs in my work. Despite being in New York, there were some things that I just didn't shake. No distance could separate me from an upbringing filled with unique Southern experiences. Of course I noticed everything that was in New York, but I was more aware of what wasn't present. Where were the young kids wearing gold teeth? Where are the girls with those decadent hairstyles? Where are the big cars and big rims? Those are the memories that were unique to me. My city friends were curious. My Geechie accent fascinated them. They didn't know if I was Hispanic, Indian, or bi-racial. These were the niceties that hadn't found their way into my work. I realized their significance.

ROWELL: Will you look back for a moment and discuss further what you think is the impact of Cooper Union and the city of New York (truly the center of the international world of art) on your production of art works? And on your concept of what constitutes art? Cooper Union in New York City must have been a major shift for you, after Charleston, SC, as you went about your visual art studies and practices. As a world site for art and its production, promotion, and preservation, New York City alone could provide any attentive and discerning person a university education in visual art and in many other significant cultural forms.

WILLIAMS: As I have already said, Cooper Union and New York City made a profound and indelible impact on me as an artist. I want to repeat that the academic and aesthetic concerns were—and will always be—very important to me. Let me add this about the City of New York as an undeclared and unstructured site for education. For a young, small-town, Southern visual artist, trying to find his way in the art world, New York City's endless extraordinary galleries and museums, along with its legions of practicing artists, more than supplement one's formal education. In fact, the public world of visual art in the City of New York is a variegated laboratory from which you are allowed to pick and choose whatever you wish to supplement your formal visual art education.

Cooper Union and the City of New York had an incredible impact on my work. Everything I read in the art history books was in arms reach. I spent a lot of time at the Metropolitan Museum of Art drooling over the Greek statues from the Hellenistic period. But I could also walk over to the Whitney Museum and see some of the most experimental and loony works of art I had ever seen. The breadth of an artistic practice is embedded in New York, it's thrown in your face, and I just happened to be a part of an institute that allowed me to carry that dynamism back into the classroom. I did visit Jeff Koons's studio in Chelsea. The scale to which he operates is incredible. It's a rare operation and one I don't intend on

replicating but to get a glimpse of a studio that employed a factory of artisans was simply mind blowing. Some artists were responsible for mixing paint and generating 3-D models while others were responsible for painting canvases and mapping and color-coding images. Experiencing music in New York is also like none other. The first concert I attended was by The Roots. The venue was somewhere in Times Square. The band was incredible but what impressed me most was Black Thought's nearly five-minute continuous rap. The crowd was hype. The band was moving. The lights were jumping and every time one of those bold beams of light hit someone's face it revealed their enthusiasm and pure joy. These guys were artists. Lyricists. Performers. It's art and it's celebrated by everyone.

So as a young, Southern artist I was given a new index of imagery and artistic practices to gauge my own development. There were so many forms of art to experience. I was afforded a new audience and viewer. There were new eyes on my work, people with no expectation but to see something profound and cutting edge. New York is a constant push forward. You can sense the appetite for new ideas. You have to be in the city to know that feeling. It's a valuable feeling.

ROWELL: Earlier you mentioned "beauty" in art. To what are you exactly referencing? It's been years since I heard an artist or an art critic or historian refer to "beauty" in contemporary art. And I am not a very young man. [*Laughter*] What is "beauty" in contemporary art? Would you apply the word "beauty" to the work you are currently creating? Unless "beauty" refers to execution in form and subject, I have no idea as to what "beauty" means, unless I am looking at landscapes, still life, or realistic or semi-realistic human figurations. In Western art, work before World War II has beautiful elements. I hope you can convince me otherwise. [*Laughter*] Today, does "beauty"—whatever it means—play a role in the making of art, especially in conceptual art?

WILLIAMS: Beauty has certainly been redefined many times over throughout modern and contemporary art. There's no longer a library of subjects, images, or figures that are labeled "beautiful images to use in art." There are beautiful elements in my work. I don't attempt to make beautiful art. My most recent work is a collage of many materials and symbols. My only goal is to arrange them in a manner that conveys the message or emotion I'm trying to put forth. Beauty is simply a result of that task. Much of my work is sculptural: old and distressed wood, rusted metal, sparkly paint, grasses that grow along rivers. These materials are beautiful. They possess beautiful qualities. Beauty is secondary in the act of making art.

ROWELL: Let me add that I do see beauty in your painting of a landscape of red roses, whose title I do not remember. It's one of your early pieces. While the subject might be traditional, its execution is not completely traditional. Its subject and, especially, how you lead us to view the subject, a field of red roses, or red flowers (or a poppy field in bloom), are the beauty I see. Of course I see the beauty in that painting, but does "beauty" play a role in your work that follows that period of your work?

WILLIAMS: *Poppies* is the title of the painting you're talking about. It is a very early painting. It's a very impressionist painting done with oil paint and a palette knife. The gaudy gold frame makes it regal and elegant. Anyone who comes to my house sees it and loves it. It is a beautiful painting. It's familiar. It's recognizable, "easy reading." I wouldn't say that it's complex. The work that I produced following *Poppies* was very different. I started at Cooper not long after, maybe a year to two. I left figurate work almost completely and began creating very abstract multimedia works.

ROWELL: Do remember when and why you moved from painting figurative, still life, and landscape art? How would you describe your early work? Do you think that making your early work prepared you for what you create now? How? Your work now is so very different from that where you started. Do you think so too? What kind of art did you create after you left those subjects and the techniques associated with the creation of them? Did you immediately begin creating conceptual art?

WILLIAMS: I became very interested in symbolism. We touched on it earlier but I just remembered an instance where New York generously threw some rare literature in my lap. I was walking somewhere in downtown Manhattan and stumbled upon a very small museum that looked like it housed antiques and maybe works from ancient dynasties. I wandered the museum and came upon *The Red Book* by Carl Jung. I didn't know what I was looking at. I was stopped by the case. It had to be something significant to be in this glass display under this very warm and dim light. I did not know this at the time, but apparently the book was recently published after a long estate battle. So I began researching his work. I became very interested in his concept of signs and symbols. And I began thinking of my experiences in Charleston, SC. I took social psychology and anthropology with an emphasis on ritual theory. I began to realize that I left my home in Charleston and never made an attempt to utilize the place that excited me most. I had so many new questions. How is the cultural landscape constructed? How does culture move throughout the city? What are the cultural markers and how do they shape the relationship of Charlestonians? Charleston is a very segregated city. I'm still shocked at how separate it has remained. I'm a spectator in my own city. More so than I was before living in New York.

ROWELL: Can you account for what led you to the creation of "conceptual art"? If you were asked to explain what is meant by "conceptual art," what would you say? And I ask the question because it seems to allow for an infinite number of forms that heretofore we never thought of as "fine art." I immediately think of the houses you have created and the installation of the cross of sweet grass, as well as the horizontal fence-like structure of white, painted stressed wood with a side grass "growing in it" on only one side. Is that description, "conceptual art," an appropriate or adequate description?

WILLIAMS: I think what led me to conceptual art was my need to create work that displayed a sentiment. It was more important to transmit feelings than it was for me to present value. That can be said for *Poppies*. What's beautiful is the expressed value of that landscape. It's nothing conceptual. I think of conceptual art as being the symbol of process whether is be

thought or production. Spontaneous. Visceral. I'd call the works you mentioned conceptual. They're poignant. There's something useful about traditional craft and construction. It's a point of entry for a viewer. It's familiar. Any departure from its intended or traditional use is immediately noticed. That goes for combinations of materials, which you see with *Cut and Caged*. I've carried this idea of self-preservation with me over the past few years. A lot of my work stems from the concept, certainly the ones you've mentioned. They're moments in which the effort to preserve oneself has been challenged or defeated. So I'd say the work is conceptual but can also be labeled social realism.

ROWELL: Would you like to comment on some of your work in the portfolio that follows in this issue of *Callaloo* as your creations of what I am referring to as conceptual art? For example, what makes it "conceptual"?

WILLIAMS: You're looking at a body of work that I began creating upon my return to Charleston in 2014. You could say it's the first series of work where I began departing from the representational art and into conceptualism. I wanted to compose my concepts with materials and not strictly images. I needed to employ the environment, everything from local African craft to the marshscape. You'll notice that the Charleston Palmetto Rose is a prominent motif in this work. In Charleston, it's a popular souvenir for tourists and a common home decoration for locals. You typically find them at the outdoor market in downtown Charleston. On most days you'll see tens of women weaving sweet grass baskets and in front of them will be a basket of Palmetto Roses. It's a craft that has lasted decades and supposedly has its ties to the Civil War. Local legend has it that a woman would give a Palmetto Rose to her true love before he stepped into the battlefields. I've also heard that black women used to gather wildflowers along the marsh, wrap them in moss to preserve the moisture, and carry them into Charleston's historic district to sell. But, with rampant development of the Sea Islands and coastal waterways a lot of that land has been removed thus taking those wildflowers with it. So the hand woven rose took its place and hasn't lost its footing yet. Though the gentleman who supplies me with the palm fronds says Palmetto trees are slowly disappearing. It's not like it used to be even two years ago. He knows those swamps like the back of his hand but those beaten paths are disappearing. What captured my attention most was young black kids selling roses throughout the historic district. Some of the kids would be out very late on school nights "hustling" and "trying to get this money" as I was often told. The rose started to embody much more than beauty and history; it began to represent a class of people overlooked in Charleston. And at this time I was keeping up with an unprecedented amount of shootings occurring in some of the black neighborhoods. Some of the kids I spoke with lived in those neighborhoods where crime spiked. I wanted to tell a story that newspapers couldn't tell. Poetic. I had at my disposal a symbol that garnered a great deal of attention and value. So I began making art with it.

In 2015 I created an exhibition titled *Souvenir*. About 5,000 roses were used in this exhibition. I spent about eight months making them. For *Oak*, the roses became the bark of a tree. It used 3,000 of the roses I made. The small gallery smelled like fresh sweet grass. Not many people recognized the shape immediately but noticed the gouges. It just looked

like something that had been torn apart. I know they recognized the roses. It was dark yet beautiful. Visitors would email me days later saying they looked at the roses a little differently since seeing the exhibition. It incited pride and empathy. I wanted to alter people's experiences with their environment and people, and I did that by appropriating common motifs. It was recognizable. And I applied it to *Boosie 3:14* and *Bun 3:42*. Those are rap verses from two very celebrated Southern rappers, Lil Boosie and Bun B of the duo, UGK. They're conscious gangster rappers. They speak about growing up around violence and drugs. They speak about poverty. They're poets. Their verses spoke to the environment I created in the exhibition. I presented their lyrics as spiritual texts. They appear Hebraic but it's an English typeface that has been manipulated. There's always fascination with something unfamiliar, right? There was a bit of discomfort expressed by some of the viewers decoding the lyrics. These verses use the word "nigger." Imagine a white person decoding the text and then coming across that word. This exhibition is in a city that stills fights over the public display of the Confederate Flag, the docking station for boats packed with enslaved Africans, and endless plantations. Walter Scott was murdered while this exhibition was open. The viewer is already bringing in a load of personal experience and precaution to this exhibition. It made my art intriguing and confrontational. My audience is a big component of the work I create. I think about my work as props to be used in installations. My work has become more conceptual since I began using this framework. Creating multisensory environments challenged my traditional approach to art making and has led me to conceptual art making.

ROWELL: When I first saw your construction of small houses, the repurposing of stressed wood, and your carpenter-like workmanship, I was reminded of some of the art of Theaster Gates. Am I the first to ask you whether you were in any way influenced by the work of Theaster Gates?

WILLIAMS: That's quite an association. I wasn't familiar with his work while living in New York. I guess that's because I wasn't producing anything related to his work. After creating the houses his name came up a couple of times. I do enjoy his work. What I've come to realize from looking at his work and listening to him speak is that his experiences are embedded in his work. When you tap into your own experiences and allow your senses to dictate your work, the results are very unique and beautiful. I enjoy the texture of aged wood, the smell of sweet grass, and the shapes cast by moss swinging from century old Oak tress. I'm receptive to these niceties.

ROWELL: How is your conceptual work received here in Charleston, South Carolina?

WILLIAMS: It's been rather difficult showing my work in Charleston. It's becoming less difficult but there are still only two or three spaces that will show non-traditional art or art that is making a strong social or political statement. After returning to Charleston from New York City my first exhibition was of small, detailed pen and ink drawings illustrating local shootings. I had to use an old photo studio in downtown Charleston for the exhibition because everyone else was looking for less controversial work to display. I typically show

in alternative spaces to avoid justifying my work to a commercial downtown gallery. For this reason, many contemporary artists leave Charleston for more progressive cities. I'll see how long I last here. I'm invested in the culture here and it's playing a major role in my work. There's much to explore.

ROWELL: If you were asked to write an artist statement, how would it read, or what are major points or concerns you'd emphasize in it?

WILLIAMS: I'm a spectator in a city of racial tension, cultural separation, and social adaptation. It's palpable yet blanketed. Charleston is a city attempting to retain its majesty despite continued acts of racial hatred, violence, and irreverence. There is an audacious fascination and fear of the *other*. It is destructive and routine. Yet, I am surrounded by a captivating landscape flooded with inner coastal waterways, sea life, colossal oak trees, and blossoming azaleas. But, it too is embedded with the horror of the African Slave Trade. The muddy coasts and swamps were once home to rice fields and plantations. Statues of slave advocates stand tall over city squares while statues of abolitionists sit on the outskirts. It is difficult to admire the landscape and architecture of this small city for too long without bits of its haunting past bubbling to the surface. History has had profound effects on the current social climate. I have at my disposal a library of local motifs needed to illustrate this moment in time. I trace the removal of black neighborhoods and the culture that is taken with it. The materials I use have cultural and historical significance, which make my construction of social commentary accessible. I provide a point of entry. There's deliberateness to wrapping delicate palmetto roses around explicit rap lyrics. It's a combination of high art or historically significant craft and what Charleston may consider to be low art, hip hop music. It's an unfamiliar synthesis. Currently, my work is the choosing of two decisions: reconstruct the image of something lost or re-imagine the process of its destruction.