

Biographical Description for The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with William T. Williams

PERSON

Williams, William T. (William Thomas), 1942-

Alternative Names: William T. Williams;

Life Dates: July 17, 1942-

Place of Birth: Crosscreek, North Carolina, USA

Residence: New York, New York

Occupations: Painter;

Biographical Note

Artist William Thomas Williams, Jr. was born on July 17, 1942, in Cross Creek, North Carolina, to William Thomas Williams, Sr. and Hazel Williams. Williams's family moved to Queens, New York, when he was four years old, but Williams would continue to visit North Carolina in the summertime.

In 1956, Williams met famed artist Jacob Lawrence, an encounter that helped him believe that he could be a professional artist. That same year, Williams was admitted to the High School for Industrial Arts in Manhattan, where he often frequented the Museum of Modern Art and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. After graduating from high school as a member of the National Honor Society, Williams entered New York City Community College in 1960, and graduated two years later with his A.A.S. degree.

In 1962, Williams was admitted into Pratt Institute. In the summer of 1965, Williams attended a summer art program at Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Skowhegan, Maine. Williams graduated with honors from Pratt Institute with his B.F.A. degree in 1966, then attended Yale University School of Art and Architecture, where he earned his M.F.A. degree in 1968. Williams returned to New York City, and with the help of his parents, rented a Soho loft that remained his home and studio throughout his career. Soon after, Williams married Patricia De Weese, with whom he had two children: Aaron and Nila.

Williams's first exhibit was a part of a group exhibition called X to the Fourth Power; it was held at the Studio Museum in Harlem, New York in 1969, a place he would return to for exhibitions numerous times. In 1971, Williams had his first show at the Reese Paley Art Gallery, where he sold out his entire exhibit. Throughout the 1970s, Williams's work would be exhibited at a number of venues, including the Museum of

Modern Art in New York, the Whitney Museum in New York, the American Embassy in Moscow, and the Fondation Maeght in France.

In 1970, Williams became a professor of art at Brooklyn College, and in 1971, he began a summer residency as a member of the faculty at Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, a position he would hold again in 1974 and 1978. Williams became the director pro tem at Skowhegan School in 1979.

In the late 1970s, Williams took his first trip to Africa, which influenced the style of his work throughout the 1980s. In 1984, Williams became a visiting professor at Virginia Commonwealth University, and the following year held a solo exhibition at the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Williams became the first black artist included in H.W. Janson's History of Art textbook in 1986, and in 1987, was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship. Williams continued to work throughout the 1990s, and his work was included in the To Conserve a Legacy: American Art from Historically Black Colleges and Universities touring exhibit in 1999. In 2006, Williams was awarded the prestigious North Carolina Award, the highest civilian honor the state can bequeath.

Related Entries

Yale University [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

PS 39 Henry Brostow School [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

J.H.S. 198, Benjamin N. Cardozo Junior High School [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

High School of Art and Design [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

Fisk University [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from ? to ?]

Artist in Residence

Virginia Commonwealth University [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from ? to ?]

Professor

Brooklyn College [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from ? to ?]

Professor

School of Visual Arts [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from 1968 to ?]

painting instructor

Smokehouse Associates [MEMBEROf]
[from ? to ?]

Founding Member