

PAT WARD WILLIAMS: PHOTOGRAPHY AND SOCIAL/PERSONAL HISTORY

by Kellie Jones

The photography of Pat Ward Williams touches on both the public and private aspects of life; many times it even conflates the two. Her work has social content, relating to the larger issues of American and human society, but the photographs can be distinctly personal, intimate, and self-conscious chronicles as well. Williams's pictures also concern both history and autobiography. As history they are systematic accounts recording events of particular significance in the larger society, and they are studies of the character and significance of those events. As autobiography they present themselves as the unique narratives of the artist's existence. Thus, history and autobiography, like the social and personal qualities of her work, also become fused. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., has pointed out the centrality of autobiography in the African-American literary tradition:

Deprived of access to literacy; the tools of citizenship, denied the rights of selfhood by law; philosophy; and pseudo-science, and denied as well the possibility; even, of possessing a collective history as a people, black Americans—commencing with the slave narratives in 1760—published their individual histories in astounding number. in a larger attempt to narrate the collective history of “the race.”

In this tradition then, the part that is the individual bears witness for the whole of the group. Autobiography becomes “the act of declaring the existence of a surviving, enduring, ethnic self.” It is an act of remembrance, of calling on the memory that implicates the collective. This autobiographical thrust in Williams's work is also linked to concepts of reterritorialization, a way of locating oneself in the world. Reterritorialization is the movement to recapture one's history, reestablish a link with the past, and redefine self. As such, Williams's photographic pieces are texts of redemption and emancipation in that they construct and redefine the record of their maker's personal and larger societal existence.

As art, Williams's works embody mythos and become expressive of the basic truths of a people's historic experience. Writing on Chicano culture, Genaro M. Padilla interestingly has observed the “close relationship between a people's desire to determine their own political fortunes and their passion to restore their own cultural mythos.” Although mythos can be the pattern of meaning and valuation of a people, it is also linked to the allegory and parable of myth. And it is interesting that myth, as story, belief or visionary ideal, is often defined in opposition to history. Indeed, for the better part of three centuries, the Western concept of history has been regarded as superior to that of myth, which has been “made to stand in for all other approaches to the past.”

Until recently, the photograph was generally understood as a straight objective record, a slice of life, “something directly stenciled off the real.” And as this type of document, photography carried the same important weight as history. During the 1970s and 1980s, however, more photographers began to reject the medium's role as one that only described the real, or one that could only provide a simple reframing of the known world. Through techniques once labeled trick photography (such as solarization, manipulation of both negative and print, rephotography, and tableau vivant), practitioners started expanding the boundaries of the medium, which during the twentieth century had been characterized largely by a documentary approach and formalist aesthetics. In the 1970s and 1980s, then, dreams, visions, myths, and memory became valid photographic subjects.

Pat Ward Williams began working with alternate processes and combining written text with photographs in the early to middle 1980s. Like other black women photographers in both Britain and the United States, she started by making documentary images. In that genre, a photograph becomes a document and a record, providing evidence and information about its subject. As photographer and critic Martha Rosler has pointed out, documentary photography is often wedded to a kind of moral stance. These are images that appeal to liberal social conscience; they generally address the socially powerful with images of the powerless and entreat their charity. They seem to say to viewers, "Do something for these people because they can't do anything for themselves." Although documentary photography has created records for those rarely imaged, it remains a problematic approach. As Williams has stated:

When I first started taking photographs, especially in the documentary tradition, I was trying to fight against what I thought were negative messages that photography had previously communicated to black people. I also realized how easy it was to fall into the same trap and become my own oppressor. A single, documentary shot is usually too little to express a broader idea about racism.

Dissatisfaction with the limitations of the solitary photograph first led Williams to employ multiple images in a single work. It was her innovations with discarded window frames, however, that truly enlarged the scope of the photographer's practice. The window frames not only presented incredible formal possibilities as polytychs, but also were familiar objects that embodied a wealth of concepts, including before/after, in front/behind, and fantasy/reality. Williams further concretized these allusions as she moved into fully three-dimensional installations.

Construction and use of alternate processes, such as cyanotype, vandyke, and most recently the dot screen, are methods that have allowed Williams to break the rules of traditional photography. These artistic actions call into question the verity and historical truth of the photographic image. In this sense, Williams's work constitutes a response to the many immediate, exact renderings of African-Americans that have depicted them as exotic, violent, or victimized. It gives primacy not just to the trained eye and the mechanical device but to the agency of the creator and the need to deconstruct an oppressive canon in order to reconstruct a truer image of the (collective) self. Many African-American artists have spoken of being discouraged in art school from using the black image. They recount being asked why they continually worked with black figures (an issue that never seemed to arise for those who used white figures), and the difficulty professors had with critiquing such pieces. One artist was even told to give up the practice, since there was no market for black images. Williams has related similar stories. But she soon discovered, given the history of documentary photography, that the problem was not simply with the existence of the black image but also with the nature of the images she produced. What Williams conceived of as normalized images were seen as aggressive by her colleagues. She found that the exotic/violent/victimized myth was viewed as the real depiction of African-Americans, and anything outside that form was considered false. As Ntozake Shange writes.

yes/ being an afro-american writer is something to be self-conscious abt/ & yes/ in order to think n communicate/ i haveta fix my tool to my needs/ i have to take it apart to the bone/ so that the malignancies/ fall away/ leaving us space to literally create our own image.

Oh, She Got a Head Fulla Hair (1985) is one of Williams's more personal, self-referential pieces. It is not strictly autobiographical, but adds yet another offering to the growing list of "hair classics" by black women, including film by Ayoka Chenzira (*Hair Piece*, 1985), theater by Ntozake Shange (*Spell #7*, 1979) and more photography by Lorna Simpson (*I. D. Series*, 1990) and Roshini Kempadoo (*Presence*, 1990). Williams's piece was indeed inspired by a Shange poem of the same title that she saw in *Black Scholar Magazine* (the poem eventually became part of the play *Spell #7*).

Oh, She Got a Head Fulla Hair is one of the photographer's earliest works to consider viewer participation. It consists of four silver prints depicting a black woman with long flowing hair that have been altered by hand coloring and multiple exposure and which rest on a shallow shelf. Streaming from this ledge to the floor are more than one hundred thin strips imprinted with sections of Shange's poem. The entire arrangement is affixed to a wall painted magenta. There is an air of reverence that emanates from the altar-like display, but there is also sensuality. Viewers are encouraged to read the strips, an action which amounts to stroking the hair-like tresses. On one level the piece may speak to black women about decisions on "what's a girl to do with this nappy stuff," or the question of whether "to weave or not to weave." But it is also about obsession; just as the female character in the poem becomes obsessed with her hair, so the viewer must become fixated in order to read the entire text in Williams's piece. In Shange's poem, hair becomes a metaphor for abundance, generative properties, and wealth. It represents unfulfilled desire and the attainment of things denied by racism and the economic disenfranchisement of black people. But by controlling one's hair one can also symbolically control one's life. As Kobena Mercer has pointed out, hairstyling is "a popular art form articulating a variety of aesthetic 'solutions' to a range of 'problems' created by ideologies of race and racism."

32 Hours in a Box . . . Still Counting (1987), is a piece that also looks at how black people attempt to "solve the problem" of racism, yet considers it in a larger historical context. This work commemorates Henry "Box" Brown's daring and imaginative escape from slavery. In 1856 he had himself shipped from Richmond, Virginia, to Philadelphia, in a box measuring not more than three feet in any direction. Upon being "delivered" to the Philadelphia Vigilance Committee (an abolitionist organization) and freedom, he went on to become a well-known abolitionist and to publish his autobiography.

With *32 Hours in a Box . . . Still Counting*, Williams moves fully into three-dimensional, freestanding work. The core element of the piece is a box of the same dimensions that Brown was mailed in. It is constructed of window frames filled with cyanotype photographs showing the figure of a black man that has been contorted to fit within the confines of this container. A single sentence wraps around the bottom of the box, compelling the viewer to circle it in order to read: *Henry Box Brown who escaped slavery enclosed in a box 3 feet wide and 2 long.*

In the last line, "2 long" refers to both the size of the box and the duration of Brown's enslavement. But this stanza also has the effect of bringing the discussion into the twentieth century. The single sentence physically connects with passages Williams has inscribed on the floor around the box describing contemporary discrimination, something that African-Americans have been subjected to for "2 long." Surrounding and delimiting the floor text are four thin columns that in their placement echo the shape of the crate. On each of these is a small, framed image—a rose, a violin, a doll's eye, and a skyscraper—representing the pillars of western society—beauty, culture, technology. Barbed wire is strung between the posts, effectively keeping the viewer away from these elements of "civilization" and giving the entire piece an air of foreboding.

Williams again delves into Philadelphia history with *MOVE?* (1988); this time, however, the incident is more contemporary. As a resident of Philadelphia and its suburbs for most of her life, the photographer can in a sense claim this history (and that of Brown) as her own. The MOVE episode though, has captured the imagination of a number of African-American artists, including mixed-media practitioner Lorenzo Pace and documentary photographer Delcina Wilson. The event occurred in May 1985, when in an effort to evict MOVE, an outspoken group professing an alternative, communal lifestyle, from a largely black, middle-class neighborhood, Philadelphia police dropped a bomb that killed eleven members (five of whom were children) and caused a fire that destroyed two city blocks.

Here Williams constructs an information room in a black, three-walled enclosure. Adorned with photocopies, text handwritten in chalk, and schematic drawings, the partitions juxtapose the various sources of materials on MOVE. There are official documents, autopsies, and police accounts, along with a report from the Philadelphia Special Investigation Commission, which

provides an authoritative perspective. But Williams has also incorporated the voice of MOVE by reproducing the group's own writings and testimonies. Handwritten in cursive script, these texts become more personal, emphasizing the group's familial relationship. The work's central element is a livingroom tableau consisting of a large television, an overstuffed armchair, and an endtable and lamp. Thus, from a very homey setting the viewer is encouraged to watch a videomontage made from local live television broadcasts of this surreal and horrifying event.

It is perhaps in *Not Guilty* (1991) that Williams thoroughly fuses the personal and the historical. The format of the window frame provides her with an instant film storyboard; in the manner of a number of contemporary photographers, including John Baldessari and Mitra Tabrizian, she places disjunctive images one against the other. While the piece actually contains just two stories, their conflation brings about broader interpretations. On the one hand is the narrative of a court case in which a policeman is accused of killing an African-American man; on the other is a tale of the breakup of a marriage. In fact, Williams was a participant in both events simultaneously: At the time she was a witness in a murder trial, her marriage was ending. As we read the piece from left to right, images of a trial alternate with those of a distressed couple. Cartoon-like balloons of text relate to neither event but provide a third commentary.

The art of Pat Ward Williams utilizes a multiplicity of media to bring alive ideas and issues on a number of different levels. The photographer often relates her own private encounter with history—she gives it a more intimate context, making it easier to assimilate. Her work is concerned with social issues, above all how these issues impact on one's life. In adopting a more familiar tone and approach to her content, she eschews didacticism that often distances the objects and their message from the viewer. In Williams's demystification of what is personal, social, historical, and mythical, we find that these ways of looking at the world are not only interrelated but inherently political. In these works, as Michele Wallace has said, "cultural reading becomes an act of resistance."