A WITNESS OF OUR TIMES: POLITICS AND COMMEMORATION IN THE ART OF PAT WARD WILLIAMS

by Moira Roth

October 5, 1991, Los Angeles
This is the first time I have seen *Accused/Blowtorch/ Padlock* and *32 Hours in a Box . . . Still Counting,* by Pat Ward Williams. They are part of “Black Photographers Bear Witness: 100 Years of Social Protest,” a traveling exhibition at the California Afro-American Museum, in Los Angeles. “Accused in 1937 of murdering a white Mississippi man, this black man was tortured with a blowtorch and then lynched,” reads the flatly worded caption to the *Life* photograph of a man chained and padlocked to a tree, alone in a setting of grass and bushes. Standing eye level and close to *Accused/Blowtorch/Padlock,* I am stunned by the image of a tortured man. Barbed wire and chains have cut into his straining body, and his back is scarred by blowtorch burns. The image, torn from a book titled *The Best of Life Magazine,* is mounted within the first pane of a weathered windowframe together with enlarged details from it in the following three panes; stenciled across these are the words of the title. A white-lettered, handwritten narrative on black tarpaper surrounds the windowframe. The text of anguish and anger begins abruptly: “There’s something going on here. I didn’t see it at first. ...Can you be BLACK and look at this without fear? ...WHO took this photograph?” The staccato fragments of words and phrases ends with, “Oh God, somebody do something.”

There are five of us in the museum: the black man alone in the photograph, the Life photographer and caption writer, the artist, and me, a Euro-American critic-historian. I am surprised when I hear voices behind me and realize that I am standing in a public museum space; it had felt so singularly private. But what does “private” mean in this context? Surely this is disgraceful public American history.

Again and again I walk around *32 Hours in a Box . . . Still Counting.* I am five feet six inches, which is about half the height of the pillars that surround the large, windowframed box. I have to crouch level with the box to examine the photographs that cover it; even then I am unable to see the faces, only the determined hunched figures. Only if I peer closely can I read the fragments of small printed text embedded in the images: “Before your very eyes. ..get away, you know something they don’t.” As in *Accused/Blowtorch/ Padlock,* this is the story of one black man, but here the man. though seemingly mute, has a name, a future, and a voice. Henry “Box” Brown was a slave who escaped from Richmond, Virginia, to Philadelphia in the 1850s by having himself ingeniously crated in a box for thirty-two hours and shipped north, where he became a public figure on the abolitionist lecture circuit and the author of a book, *Underground Railroad.* Williams has said that the piece constitutes “a kind of heroic sculpture or maybe even a monument,” and that it is also about inventive problem-solving.

There is a painful physicality to being so near these experiences, these voices of American life and history. This is American art for American audiences of all ethnicities and cultures.

October 6, 1991
While in the car with Pat Ward Williams, who is taking me to the Los Angeles airport, I look at her huge collection of family photo albums for the first time.

I am struck by the richness of her visual history. Some of the photographs are faded and torn, others well preserved; there are casual snapshots and posed studio portraits. Many of them were taken by Williams's father. She has boxes of his negatives in her home; indeed, has described herself as a second-generation photographer. There is page after page of history-group scenes and portraits of men and women, old and young, and family outings on beaches and public indoor gatherings.

Three images stand out. In a studio photograph, a young girl dressed in early twentieth-century formal garb holds the arm of an ornate chair as she looks out seriously, almost sternly. "My Aunt Pearl. She's now in her eighties and the matriarch of the family, the oldest one living. Mother had nine brothers and sisters." The second is also a posed image: a huge gathering of more than one hundred people sitting in a hall at the end of a banquet. The women are in evening dress, wearing corsages and pearls, and many of the men are in tuxedos. "The occasion? I'm not sure. I can ask my father. " The third photograph is more casual and records some sort of a holiday outing. Two young men and two young women stand in bright sunlight on a rock outcrop by the shore; a tree to one side precisely frames the scene. "That was taken by my uncle. It's of Aunt Delia and Aunt Radie. The two men? Friends, or perhaps they were courting my aunts." This third photograph and its mood reminds me of the first time I saw Williams's work.

May, 1988, New York
Portia Cobb, an African-American video-film artist, and I have flown in from California to New York. We are intent on making a video on the art and artists of "Autobiography: In Her Own Image," at the INTAR Latin American Gallery, and Williams has traveled from Baltimore to meet us there. The group show, curated by Howardena Pindell, contains work by twenty women of color. The experience of researching and writing for the exhibition's catalog, and meeting many of its artists—among them Emma Amos, Camille Billops, Vivian E. Browne, Marina Gutierrez, Margo Machida, Yong Soon Min, Alison Saar, Clarissa T. Sligh, Asiba Tupahache, and Kay WalkingStick—is to have a huge impact on me, constituting a major turning point in my thinking about contemporary American art.

In the tall, double-hinged, five-paneled curved windowframe of *Ghosts That Smell Like Cornbread,* the faces and bodies of six women and a lone man loom out in this evocation of an older, rural, Southern world; despite the casualness of their poses, the scale, together with the altar framing, makes the women seem majestic. The installation contains a complex collage of constructed images, including (as I learn later) Aunt Radie, who is jauntily perched on the bumper of a 1940 Dodge. For all its poetic nature, in a curious way the work is analytic. It is clearly not only about memory but also about the way memory is often formed by photographs. Almost always in Williams's art, the hand of the artist—often represented by handwritten texts—is emphasized; here, it is literally the image of Williams's own hands holding snapshots in the bottom-right panels. Like a magician-conjurer, she deals out a pack of "memory cards" as if summoning up apparitions from the past. Small snapshots appear here and there, superimposed on enlargements whose scale conceals their own snapshot origins. The colors of browns and blues of the photographs (cyanotypes, vandyke brown prints, silver photographs, and film positives), played off against the fresh, white paint of the windowframe, not only suggest a sense of age and time but also invoke, especially the blue tones, an other-worldly, spiritual aura. This aura is enhanced by the work's title and the fact that the windowframe rests on a table on which are set a circle of stones and a broken cup—references to grave sites and the African-American tradition of placing on the grave a person's favorite objects or the last article used before death. There is another unseen element in the 1986 installation: oral history. As Williams tells Cobb and me, "1 was really drawn to the tales of heroism and common sense that I heard about these women. ...All the women are from the South, and except for my mother, ...they are all dead. As a child I knew them briefly, but their real presence was in the stories and the photographs." In our interview, she also remarks on the role of the windowframe: "It says, 'Look again. There's something going on here.' The many panes of a windowframe add a natural sequencing and a way to expand the visual content. Many of my pieces are done within windowframes."

This is the stuff of Williams's art: stories and photographs and her reflections on their nature. Intertwined with them is her fascination with the shifting, elusive, often contradictory makeup and function of memory and her passion to commemorate artistically certain histories. This is as true for *Accused/Blowtorch/Padlock* and *32 Hours in a Box . . . Still Counting* as it is for *Ghosts That Smell Like Cornbread.* In all three works, form and content mesh together tightly as she employs a range of materials and formal devices that act as highly inventive metaphors for her concerns. The layering and versatility of her various photographic processes, enlarged details and snapshots, handwritten and printed texts, together with the motif of the windowframes, combine to suggest a range of time sequences, differing temporal and spatial perspectives, and voices. During our meeting at INTAR, Williams relates an encounter of a few weeks earlier at the opening of the "Autobiography: In Her Own Image" exhibition. A man remarked to her that the *Ghosts That Smell Like Cornbread* was very different from *Accused/Blowtorch/Padlock,* which he had seen the previous year in the exhibition "Race and Representation" at the Hunter College Art Gallery, in New York City. Williams asks him what he means by "different." He responds, "The other piece was very political, and this one is so much quieter and seems to be drawn from your personal family experiences." Williams comments: "This story brings up issues that are important to me personally. I don't see myself as a black woman artist, but I am an artist who is a black woman. There are moments when I feel political injustice, and I express these feelings in my art. And I have other moments when I'm not angry, when I'm thinking about my family, about my daughter or my lover or God. Or I'm trying to work out the logistics in my own personal life. I don't see one subject as more important than the other, but even that's political, isn't it? Personal politics? Sexual politics?"

November, 1991, Berkeley, California
After visiting Williams's home and studio in Los Angeles, I have spent the last few weeks in my study in Berkeley, reading about her in reviews, catalogs, and interviews, and looking at videos and reproductions of her works. Although asked by Elsa Longhauser, director of the Paley/ Levy Galleries at Moore College of Art and Design, to write only an essay, I proposed to her an additional "Narrative Chronology" on Williams. Now I have just completed this, a large sprawling mass of voices, events, and facts.

Just as the artist herself has discussed the inadequacies of earlier single-frame photographs—"I had to figure out what to do with my photograph to make it show what was outside the frame, and the context of what I was showing"—I, too, feel the need to provide as best I can a sense of what is "outside the frame" in Williams's work, that is, what is impossible to capture within the single lens of my own vantage point.

It seems to me that the biographical context of her life, her own readings of her art and accounts of her artistic speculations over time, together with the critical reactions to it, are needed in order for critics, historians, and viewers to experience the layered context of Williams's thinking and references. Especially now, with the stress on theory in art criticism, the interview mode is often dismissed and biographical detail is omitted or termed old-fashioned unless it is heavily deconstructed. Researching and writing this essay has made me return again to what I view as stumbling blocks in contemporary theoretical criticism.

We need to bring back more fully into critical discourse the first-person voice of the artist. In developing culturally diverse art histories—and taking into account the often differing racial and cultural backgrounds of the artists, their critics/historians and viewers—it is both appropriate and necessary to develop a mode of critical presentation that takes into account the artist's voice, opinion, and intention as well as the work itself and its critical reception.

Because I write cross-culturally, I increasingly experience the need to discuss the work with the artist; certainly this has been true in my relationship with Williams. My reasons are twofold. First, I need to do so to monitor my own cultural biases as well as my ignorance about cultural differences. For example, despite our shared middle-class backgrounds (as I am not only a Euro-American, but was also raised in England in the latter 1930s and 1940s), my experience of class is vastly different from that of the childhood world of Williams's middle-class, segregated Yeadon, Pennsylvania, in the 1950s and early 1960s. I would need to know more from her about this experience if I were to consider examining the subject of class in her work (something incidentally, that seems not to have been explored so far, although it constitutes a very important aspect of her art). Second, however, I am drawn to a paradigm of collaboration in contemporary criticism between artists and critics. Together we need to talk out and forge new critical standards as we all live in what Guillermo Gomez-Pena has named North America's "border culture." In his writing and art performances, he has frequently called for critical recognition of this "multicultural paradigm." He maintains rightly that, "unlike the images on television or in commercial cinema, depicting a monocultural middle-class world existing outside of international crises, *contemporary United States society is fundamentally multicultural, multilingual, and socially polarized. So is its art* [italics his]. ...Today, if there is a dominant culture, it is border culture. And those who still haven't crossed a border will do it very soon. All Americans (from the vast continent America) were, are, or will be border crossers. "

Williams is prominent among contemporary artists in this country who are artistically as well as personally and politically conscious of their existence in this "border culture." She offers, too, a possible paradigm shift in political and public art debates in her insistent and fluid way of moving back and forth between more personal and more public politics. She brilliantly and forcefully expands our notion about who lives in this country and what our history is as we circle *32 Hours in a Box . . . Still Counting* or sit before the videotape and stand to examine the wall evidence of *MOVE?* and its mourning aftermath, *Day of the Dead/Little Angels.* She asks of us, as well as of herself, what price we pay for living and how we remember our pasts as we move back and forth in front of the single photo mural of *The Cost of Living,* or turn from one mural to the next in the *I Remember It Well* installation.

A phrase keeps running through my head while I have been writing this essay on Pat Ward Williams: "Witness of Our Times. " It is something I heard Hung Liu say several years ago as she described her ambitions as an artist to be "a witness of our times." Liu, trained in Beijing and now teaching at Mills College, in Oakland, California, works with Chinese history and memory, often resorting to turn-of-the-century photographs by Westerners, together with those of Chinese photographers that draw upon Western photographic conventions Recently, Liu has written that "with these images, I am exploring the question of personal and national identity as they drift across the concepts and experiences of 'homeland' and 'new home.'" Williams, too, explores personal and national identity. Although her own homeland is singular, ours is a country so affected by racism that it often appears a divided nation. But this country is changing in its balance of political and economic power, and in this evolving, fractured new world, Williams's investigation, like Liu's, of identity, memory, history, culture and race, and her convergence of the personal and the public, may constitute central loci of artistic concerns in the future.
Williams is African-American. It is no accident that she and other artists of color are in the forefront of these layered explorations of identity in their art. Race, as key an ingredient in one's identity—perhaps more so—as gender, class, age, or sexual preference, has so often been painfully foregrounded in the lives of artists of color. Currently, however, the ironic twist is that this means their lives have prepared them better than those of most Euro-American artists for the urgent task of reexamining American cultural and ethnic identities, which all of us in this country are, like it or not, going to have to confront shortly.

In contemporary American art it is artists of color, frequently women, who produce the richest and most layered sense of the impact of race and culture on identity. I suspect that, with the changing demographics in North America, Euro-American artists will be drawn, inexorably, to this subject. So far, however, almost all have consciously—for the obvious reasons of the older dominance of white psychological norms as well as white economic and political power—conceived their artistic exploration of identity exclusively in terms of gender, sexual preference, and occasionally class. If Euro-American artists wish to take on the role of "witnesses of our times," they, too, must learn to explore the impact of culture and ethnic backgrounds on themselves. Pat Ward Williams has already carried out such explorations; her work may well function as a major model for artists in this new “border” world of ours.

November 8, 1991 , New York
I visit the “Artist of Conscience” exhibition in the Alternative Museum. Among works by such artists as Sue Coe, Leon Golub, David Hammons, Barbara Kruger, Margo Machida, Yong Soon Min, Adrian Piper, Juan Sanchez, Nancy Spero, and others, I find Williams’s *Day of the Dead! Little Angels* (1989). Its windowframe of eight panes, texts, and photographs tells the story of the children who died during the police assault on the MOVE rowhouse in Philadelphia in 1985. There are images of live children: a child on a playground slide is laughing, but the text reads “Body D.” A young boy sitting at a desk, his hands clasped in front of him, smiles at us—“Body H.” A child in leotards makes a quick gesture with her body, twisting like a young dancer’s. Underneath this black-and-white image is a red-lettered text, its wording sometimes obscured by the lively presence of the child’s body. “Body G” consists of the incomplete remains . . . child. The sciatic notch is quite wide and . . . range. The base, back and parts of . . . present as is the right ascending ramus . . . anterior hands and right foot are missing.”

Day of the Dead/Little Angels stuns me, as did *Accuse/Blowtorch/Padlock.* It makes me think as well as feel. It makes me remember the children and mourn their deaths. It forces me to ask myself how much I know of the MOVE organization history except from accounts by the media. It makes me think about racism and power not only in Philadelphia in 1985 but in the Bay Area in 1991. Most of all, it makes me think about what we must do to protect all our children in this country, to protect them not only from death but also to ensure their health, their education, and their opportunities.

November 21, 1991, Berkeley, California: *32 Hours in a Box . . . Still Counting*
Today, I have a conversation with Diane Tani, a San Francisco photographer, who reminds me of the dual implications of Williams’s title *32 Hours in a Box . . . Still Counting.* Certainly, the work is commemorative of Henry “Box” Brown’s heroic journey North in the 1850s, but the sculpture also addresses the 1990s. Williams has described the four freestanding columns that surround the large box as representing “the pillars of Western society” that continue to confine African-Americans. The last words of the title remind us that there is a need to continue monitoring and, when necessary, to take inventive actions against oppression.

In this retrospective exhibition at Moore College, there will be a major new piece entitled *What U Lookn At?* This question—what we see and how we see—runs like a refrain through much of Williams’s work, as does her insistence that “politics invades our personal lives.” But there is a further question, too, that Williams poses. What, ultimately, most haunts and confronts me about the work is that she makes us examine history and memory through the lens of the present, and asks us how we will respond to all this, be it through commemoration, shifts of consciousness, or acts of conscience.

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