

Gerald Williams  
Rebecca Zorach  
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Never the Same

Interview with Gerald Williams at his home in Sumter, South Carolina, in November 2011, by Rebecca Zorach for Never The Same.

Gerald Williams is a painter and a founding member of AfriCOBRA. Born in Chicago, he earned a Masters in Fine Arts at Howard University, served in the United States Air Force, was a Peace Corp Volunteer for several years, taught in public schools in Chicago and Washington, D.C. and served as Arts and Crafts Director for the United States Air Force for twenty years until his retirement in 2004. He has exhibited in Chicago, nationally, and internationally.

Rebecca Zorach (RZ): Maybe you could talk a little bit about what led up to the founding of AfriCOBRA, from your point of view, how you got to know the other people who were a part of it, what you were doing at the time, and how it all started?

Gerald Williams (GW): It should be easy to think back 42 years! I was a student in the Art Institute's program for people who attended evenings and on weekends, the Evening Program. They were matriculating everybody in there: you had ladies in mink coats from Lake Forest, but everybody was pursuing some kind of skill acquisition that they were providing. So I had just gotten out of the Air Force after four years, after coming back from Okinawa, where I spent 18 months, and I had immediately enrolled in the Art Institute and at Chicago City College, at the same time, and was working full time. Because I wanted to finish my bachelor's degree, which I had begun before I went in the military. So I landed a job at Northeastern Illinois State Teachers College—at that time it was called Illinois Teachers College North, and there was an Illinois Teachers College South, which was on the South Side, in Englewood. Two campuses, Jeff Donaldson was working there, he was on the faculty in the Art Department, and I was what they called the technical assistant, whatever that meant. I also had a studio that I had gotten in the same building that Wadsworth had a studio in. It was over next to the University of Chicago, in fact it was owned by the University at one time, built during the Columbian Exposition in the 1890s, and it was great having a studio here in this historic building! It was kind of an inspiration, in fact. That's how I met Wadsworth, because he was there, too. He had one side of the building, and I had the other side. The two of them, we didn't know we knew each other. One day Jeff came by to visit Wadsworth and he said that he had noticed some work on the other side of the building and he told Wadsworth, he didn't connect it to me and so forth. Eventually I mentioned to Jeff that I knew Wadsworth and he said, "oh, are you the artist who's in the other side of the building?" And so we talked on and off and then he mentioned one day that they were getting together a group of artists to organize and to talk about issues, to develop a strategy for dealing with some of the inequities that existed in the art world, as far as the mainstream and its relationship or lack thereof, with the inner city. I agreed to come to some of the early meetings, which also included Barbara Jones, Jae Jarrell and a couple of the artists who worked on the Wall.



RZ: So this was after the Wall of Respect was completed?

GW: We met just as the wall was being concluded. Wadsworth and Jeff, and Barbara, and a few other people, were already working on the concluding aspects of it. We started meeting just as they were concluding. At that time also, there was an organization of artists who were protesting a conference at Columbia College, a conference on black art that was organized without any input from the artists in Chicago. And so this group COBRA, Coalition of Black Revolutionary Artists, was organized to protest that meeting and to demand some involvement. Jeff and some of the other artists stormed the meeting and disrupted it and so forth. But AfriCOBRA, finally, one day—we were just having get-togethers, "hey, let's get together and talk about some artwork,"—so we started meeting on a regular basis and we decided, well, let's form this, let's form an organization of artists. We have some issues that we can work on and chief among the issues was the idea of "what is Black Art?" And, is that something that needs to be spoken about, worked on definitively. Is there such a thing as black art?

We knew it—an identity—existed in music, that there was a definite connection between attitudes and sensibilities, and style. That existed in black music, in dance and in writing. But in visual arts there was no real definitive stamp that collectively could be identified as black art. There were some individuals, Jacob Lawrence of course, and Romare Bearden, who identified as black artists and their work had some definite connotations for themselves and the way that they worked, and they captured some of the essence of black life and certainly some of the visions of the black community and history. But we were looking for something that was a collective, something we all could tap into and pull in what we were actually seeing on the streets. I mean, it was like digging in the weeds and looking around the corner and down the block, and seeing what we could see, as far as an expression that we could all focus on. What were people saying and doing and how do people look and what were they wearing. And how can we tap into that. If you could forgive me for a contemporary reference to the idea of a



But you know, he was right, you know, paint what you know, or draw what you know, and look at it as what you know. And it was just about that time that AfriCOBRA really became an important aspect of my involvement in art. So it caused me to focus a lot, it was a linchpin for all of us. We all had our style, Wadsworth had a style that was already well developed and Jeff had a style that was already developed and Jae had her medium that she was developing as well as Barbara. But we all made a quantum leap from where we started to where we wound up after our first conscious effort to focus on the principles that we decided to work on.

RZ: So you talked about color and lettering; how about mimesis? Can you say a little more about that?

GW: Mimesis is probably, to me, the most fascinating principle, because it's not clear what it means, it's not clear what it meant then. It wasn't clear what was meant in some writings on African art, where it is used. Mimesis, you know, at its root, means to mimic or to copy, to imitate. But clearly that's what African and Oceanic and most indigenous art forms are. They're recreations of the world, in most cases, human beings or the human, transformation of that into the brain and then ultimately in some concrete object. And then in that they are depicting personalities or visions or some kind of spiritual connection. How that's done by 20th century, 21st century people, is, you know, open for exploration. Because when you reduce something to the state of a phantasm, then you're stripping it to its bare bones, identifiable or recognizable traits, and they went back to stick figures, for the most part.

RZ: Yeah, in that context I wonder about the relationship at the time, in the late 1960s, of mimesis to abstraction, which was such a dominant mode in painting and sculpture and the art world

GW: In the mainstream art world.

RZ: So was mimesis a conscious objection against abstraction? Or was it a reinterpretation, or how do you see that?

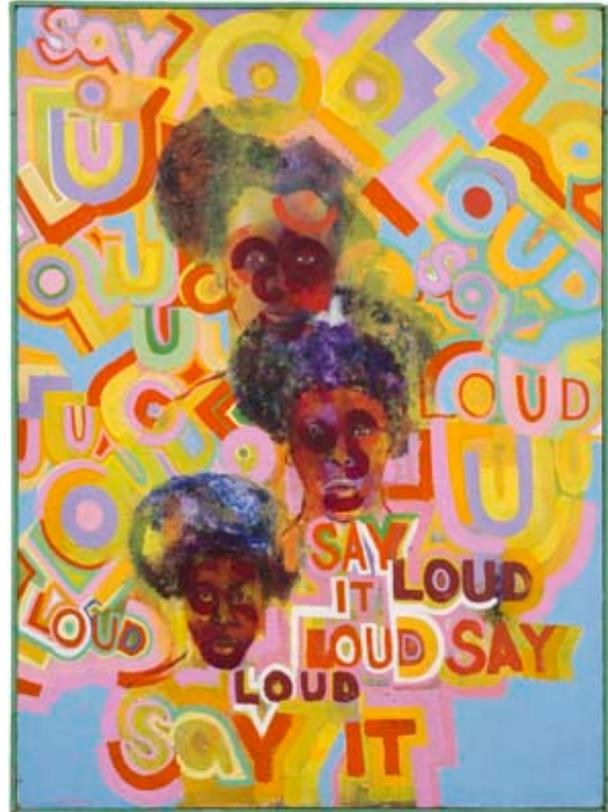
GW: I don't think we were reacting or necessarily rebelling in the same way. Not in the sense that, well, maybe in the sense of Sturm und Drang, I'm sure you recall that movement which applied to literature, German literature, and the desire to break away from existing modes of expression that were dominating, at that time, their forms of expression. And basically it was the precursor to German Nationalism. In 1968, the whole black consciousness movement was a kind of Sturm und Drang. I don't think you can find anybody that's making that reference.

RZ: [laughs] No, I don't think so either!

GW: So be sure to quote me And I don't think I'm being far-fetched by making that connection because there was black nationalism, certainly, during the idea of nation, nation-building.

RZ: "Nation Time."

GW: Nationalism was a very integral facet of a lot of the dialogue. I did a painting that's called Nation Time. But it



was the idea of rejecting ballet dancers and the notion that fine art meant only dealing with society or people that have gone through a refinement process.

RZ: With abstraction, there's the whole history of European art that's representational but obviously almost exclusively depicts white people, and then you have abstraction where there aren't any figures depicted. I'm just kind of curious about the whole idea of mimesis; it seems like there could be a political component to that in that if you're rejecting abstraction you're also embracing the possibility of representing black figures.

GW: But that's where the idea of a black consciousness is important, because do you have to have an image or figure there in order to express the same kind of sentiments that clearly make your work recognizably or unequivocally black art done by a black person? That, I think, is still open-ended. I think that there are some common threads that run through a whole lot of work that was done since, 1966, 1968, you know, that time period. There are some common threads that if you look at and examine closely, in all of the work that was done since then, you're gonna find, in things that have been stripped completely of image, that there are references to black identity or black essence. We probably could go through a whole bunch of work by a whole bunch of people, and say: "well, this is, this is, this is, this isn't." But that's what we were striving for. What is it that makes this work unequivocally work done by a black artist?

RZ: And so it's not the content of what it's representing, or it's about the content, but not about what it's literally depicting necessarily.

GW: Well, it was, it was important for us, if we were going to depict what was going on, it was important for us to depict the Afro, the style. The revolutionary suit that Jae Jarrell made brought in that fervor, the image of a revolution. We weren't gun-shooting revolutionaries, but it was the symbolic expression of a break from what had been going on, and suddenly you could put out some new precepts and concepts that hadn't really been dealt with before.

RZ: Can you talk a little bit about the themes? The black family, I think, was the first one?

GW: Well, we decided, you know—I don't know if we met all of us together, sat down and said, "let's do a painting on the same subject," and it turned out, "oh, we'll do the black family, let's all do the subject matter 'the black family,' and see what we come up with." And from that, we'll see what we all have in common, and how we use color and how we use line, and shape, and composition. And that was the first painting. It was not my first Black Family painting. I brought in a painting that was completely unlike all the others, I had a family grouping of family members sitting around a table, eating dinner. Just sitting around the table, mother and father, sister and brother, maybe a baby or something. The most immediate reaction was, "it's too Renaissance." In Renaissance painting, people are sitting in a group, whether it's in a temple or at an altar or around a table or something. It wasn't breaking new ground. So, my next painting conformed to what the others had done, the other black family was a man and a woman and a child, or maybe two, in a portrait. And that's why mine looks that same way. But again, we were looking at some uses of color and, you know, composition became important because we decided on the idea of frontality of the images facing, looking out, looking directly at you. And in a confrontational manner even, and that's why they kinda look that way. I'm not even sure that my original composition isn't underneath the one that I finally did, I don't know. It might be!

RZ: And what about the politics of that theme, was that, was it a political statement?

GW: Well, yeah, the idea of family unity was important. At that time, the only married individuals in the group were Wadsworth and Jae—Barbara, Jeff, and I were single. But you know I don't even think there was an expression of an ideal, or the expression of the way life is supposed to be like, or a family is supposed to be like, but it was the unit of parent and child being the basis for society. I'm not sure that we even had discussions about that extent, you know, other than that families were important. I call mine "Say it Loud," you know, which was a popular song at that time, and so, that's why the writing is all "say it loud, I'm black and I'm proud."

And basically mean that families being together should be expressing themselves, "say it loud," you know, a guy walking down the street with his wife and child is saying it loud.

RZ: Yeah, I guess I was thinking of the Moynihan Report and the attacks on the black family in the 1960s. Was this a kind of response to mainstream perceptions about black families?

GW: Well, it was not a reaction, or it was not even, I don't think, addressing the Moynihan Report. Or even the political aspect, other than the aesthetic vision, you know, there's beauty in seeing a family together. And I think that was the main essence of what we were dealing with, the beauty of a family, a family together. Then as now there's issues with families. But we were dealing with the aesthetics of family unity.

RZ: Was there also a theme, "I Am Better Than You MF"? Was that actually a group theme?

GW: Well, we were looking for what we could do as a common thing, to consolidate the principles. "I am better than these motherfuckers and they know it," was a theme that was introduced by Jeff Donaldson. And he was making reference to the kind of attitude that you have to have, coming from a perspective or from an environment of low self-esteem, where all your life you've been told that these people are better than you, that you live in a world where everyone is better than you, or accorded better treatment, or looks better, or they know more. The idea was, "well, let's turn this around a little bit."

What happens if I say that I'm better than you? What today is called swagger, but it was called swagger then, and every opportunity that an individual has to project himself in a way that shows he has control of himself, or he is master of himself. Swagger is a form of defiance of somebody's low expectation of you. That is probably, is the best way that I can sum up what I thought was going through Jeff's mind. I didn't like the idea, Jeff—I believed—didn't like the idea. It became a troubling topic for him to even deal with, although it was his subject and his idea, he couldn't, or didn't want to, deal with it.

RZ: Why was that, do you think?

GW: Because maybe he recognized, you don't need to say that. You don't need to put that in a picture.

RZ: Is there a way that it was put into the pictures not literally? I mean, was there a kind of bravado or swagger just in the style or self-presentation of the artwork, do you think, regardless of whether the theme was stated? I mean, because you were all well-trained and talented artists, and just by putting your work out there, in a way, you're saying something about your work that's, not a swagger overtly, but it seems like part of the statement of work itself, is, maybe not, "I'm better" but it's like, "I'm really good."

GW: Okay. Jeff didn't do an "I am Better..." painting. He had started one, and brought it in for critique, Wadsworth did one, Barbara did one, Jae didn't deal with it, I don't recall—she may have done something and I just don't remember. My painting was, "I Am Somebody." That's how I dealt with it. And I got that from, the expression "I am somebody" was from Jesse Jackson's mantra, at the end of his meetings at Operation Breadbasket, which became Operation PUSH, every Saturday morning he would end this kind of benediction ending in the phrase "I am somebody." And that stuck, I mean, to me, that was more important. That's swagger beyond anything else you could do or say, to say "I am somebody." That's what the President does, our current President does, that

people hate him for. You know, look at it that way. You don't have to say it. But to me that was important, and that's what my painting became, I am better than, I am somebody.

GW: Well, everything, all the work that I did, AfriCOBRA work, was out there. Big and bold, whether it was Nation Time, or Don't Be Jiving, or Be Serious, Take Freedom, Cooperation, Unity, I dealt with it as overtly as possible. To make a comparison between then and now, I think that there's some issues now that I think I'm going to deal with, I'm not sure how to deal with, you know, to address them, or to put them down visually.

RZ: What kind of issues?

GW: I think the environment, you know, the environment is something that we all have to live with, or die with, or we all certainly should be concerned about. And I always think about Marvin Gaye's song, "Who Really Cares?" on his album "What's Going On?" It's as much about today as it was about 1970 or 1972.

Where he talks about oil wasted in the sea, and fish filled with mercury. It's a very poignant statement about the state of the environment that is as relevant today as it was then.

RZ: It's all the more poignant because it's still an issue today and we saw it that long ago.

GW: We saw it in living color! And the idea of uplifting people. There's still a lot of work to be done in family relationships and personal relationships, you know. We live in a world where it's easy to flush somebody down the toilet. We're part of a throwaway society, where we throw people away like we do a Walkman that you don't need anymore, so you just throw it away, and all this other stuff that's filling up landfills. You know, the idea of human relationships where you feel like you're bothering somebody when they have their headset on! And their situational awareness doesn't include you or anybody else around them. It's whatever's coming through their headset. And everybody walks along with a "do not disturb" sign on them. That's life today, so that's the kind of history that I think is important—the essence of life in 2011, for this generation.