

Facadeaside

A PHILOSOPHY BLOG, MOSTLY

Review, Elzie Williams III at M 2 3 in New York City; Closes July 16, 2023

POSTED BY [JACOB GOLDBAS](#) · JUNE 27, 2023 ·

Who: Elzie Williams III

What: Politics as Usual

Where: M 2 3, 24 Henry Street, New York City, NY

When: Attended Sunday, June 18, 2023, Closes July 16, 2023

Bottom Line: Williams punches politics, but the show ain't a downer

How? J train; F train to Chinatown, Two Bridges Neighborhoods

Intro. & OOO

What is not a thing? If it exists, such a thing that is not a thing, I could not say that out loud. Could I think it? I do not know. We talked about this all the time in college. The question of being is the focus of aesthetic philosopher Graham Harman, who uses this idea, that everything is a thing, for theories of art and philosophy. Harman's philosophy starts with objects, and thus has both a reassuring and nauseating objectivity; as in, phew I am an object – and argh! I am an object. Harman's thoughts fit a little too snugly into computer programming; and a capitalist society that just wants us to buy stuff. That's our amuse bouche, hors d'oeuvres.

I am going to review Elzie Williams III at the M 2 3 topically, sculpture by sculpture.

Monstro

REPORT THIS AD

Those vested corporate interests, such as Disney, might have reasons for wanting consumers to buy objects. And the golden goodie here might be the sacred blessings of adulthood, that Mickey Mouse can somehow give me what my Bar Mitzvah did not. I am not making this up. In 2022 there were two major motion pictures about Pinnochio, and a New Yorker Magazine review about a new translation of the original Italian 19th century masterpiece. Pinnochio is an insult to millennials who have not yet grown up, but guess who invented a capitalist childhood, adulthood, and the puppet (buy stuff) toy, to signify adulthood (to buy stuff), in capitalist society to begin with. Disney's Pinnochio was twice kitsch by using a heavily edited script based on the original, and secondly for putting the puppet in Lederhosen, which are Swiss. And then to make a remake on a twice kitsch artwork in the first place, is definitely kitsch. Porcelain collectibles, such as those at Grandma's house, are considered kitsch, as explored by Jeff Koons. Putting a kitsch Pinnochio in a plastic bottle, however, when done on purpose and in full awareness of the contradictions of this porcelain figure of a puppet, who longs to be a real boy – yeah actually that's all camp. The sculpture is cool and that's why we like it.



Denso-Tron (Prototype)

In the corner of the first room, Williams posted their first totem. Totems are human insofar as people have always piled stuff, and of particular significance to Native American cultures. Somebody made them in 20th Century art, and high artists in New York City never looked back. I personally like the totems of Alonsa Guevara and Genesis Breyer P-Orridge.

Williams' sculpture might make a polite rebuttal *eo ipso*. The thesis of the piece – that this is an alien's head made of QR barcodes – might argue against comparisons. These symbolize entry into the next phase of buying something, like showing your money. So much of entertainment these days is about advertising, and sometimes entertainment and advertisements are so close to one another that they are hard to distinguish. We see this in the movies, with product placements all over. Are we dissatisfied with capitalism because capitalism is merely promises to get to the next phase?



The News

I didn't particularly like the cheese puff jar, but I'll play.

The plastic jar is on a sheet of shiny magazine collages, and filled with magazine clippings. The clippings, inside the matted plastic jar, are more green and slimy without light to reflect them. They look disgusting. The jar reminds one of the Elementary school teacher, or the Church raffle game, to give points or sell tickets for guessing how many jelly beans were in the jar. When Sabina told me she supported universal basic income, what she was saying was as a market researcher of the economy, and meeting so many people; she was talking about everyone she met behind me, all the friendship ghosts behind me I couldn't see. I find it strange millennials are not more frustrated with corporate greed. It's weird, no?



If I Ruled the World (Time Traveler Bag)

Guys I can't do tattoos because of the Holocaust. I did the high school readings about the Holocaust like we all do, and I was raised in a Jewish family, so I was always proud to be a little more hurt than anyone else. Whenever I think about how hurt and offended I was about the Trump Administration, I try to think about empowering steps I can take for myself to inspire myself and others.

Williams' Frank Ocean Bag is headlines about the Black Lives Matter movement. This designer bag, just like an NPR or a New Yorker Magazine tote bag, comes complete with a compact disc of Frank Ocean's Blonde. Together on a high fashion bag, stitched of the newspaper and magazine clippings, the Frank Ocean album means more. Frank Ocean's "Blonde" is a music album titled as concession that as a black bisexual man he will never be white and blonde, and thus pure, like Marilyn Monroe in popular culture. But Frank, who cares about this when police shoot innocent black men?



Rumble in the Jungle

Ah, yes, the *National Geographic*. Williams weaves a collage of National Geographic covers beneath a plaster brick, including hand prints with a signature of Muhammad Ali, next to hands too small to belong to the famous boxer. The magazine covers look racist in retrospect and context, next to each other. Insects and baboons are next to human beings. Dude what? National Geographic also applies to kitsch-camp-vernacular discussions. Using Africans without tribute to history is kitsch. Re-using National Geographic as timeless scientific knowledge is camp. Magazines as print culture, overtaken by digital media, is vernacular, because it's an old technology, no one can seem to throw away. The magazine is a trophy for a person, here woven into a carpet like a poacher's living room carpet is a bear, always the evil villain in the movie.



That's Hot, but You're Fired!

Immanuel Kant famously said minds create reality, and not the other way around. William James and Richard Rorty called this the Mirror Fallacy. The mirror fallacy is minds are only the mirrors of reality; and secondly that minds should only merely be the mirrors of reality. This radical empowerment hell-spawned: 1) Sartre, who realized everyone did create the world, and so we can, too; and 2) Heidegger, who said, people are thrown into the world.

Williams' piece is a cardboard brick wall, with a magazine page, price stickers and a \$100 bill. Well, yeah, definitely David Wojnarowicz. But also corporations who have the pretense to expect customers to pay for stuff they cannot afford. Oh yeah, that housing crash that set off the Great Recession in 2008. Now I remember.



Eye Robot (Prototype)

Eye Robot is a great piece. The work is magazine cut outs of photographs of human eyes; and this mosaic of clippings into the shape of an extraterrestrial skull, which ironically has holes instead of eyes. So, compared to *Denso-tron*, this sculpture has the reciprocal problem. In this sculpture, instead of promises promising promises, we meet the eyes of people. If *Denso-tron* refers to the insatiable consumerist demand, *Eye Robot*, with its eyes, and eyes, the eye-and-eye if you will, confronts the question of what happens when people finally reach the eyes, like a dog catching a car. Pornography satisfies many. In this sculpture, one is left hungry. Bravo!



Mercantile Business

Mercantile Business is a totem. As its bottom, there is a cash register drawer. On top of that is an antique *Sears Roebuck Catalogue*, an upside down Kentucky Fried Chicken fast food soda cup, an Uncle Ben's rice can, and finally a Tiffany's Jewelry box, filled with a junk pile here masterfully rendered by paper plop in its most ugly gray. Williams might be giving a nod to magazines again by finally shredding the things, in order create the paper mache.

The narrative of this piece I think can be explained partly by superposition. Superposition is a geology term that means the oldest rocks are at the bottom of any given cross section of the Earth's core. In this case, cash and the mom and pop store was knocked out by Sears magazines, which was before people cooked Uncle Ben's rice at home. We know from the garbage pile what Williams thinks of all this consumer bull roar, although the fast food cup grabbed my attention.

It might be that KFC started before Uncle Ben's, but there are some race commentaries going on here. Colonel Sanders, the clown representing the franchise, is a colonel in Kentucky, a state that was in the Confederacy. Likewise, fried chicken has weird implicit racist connotations to it. I don't know enough about it, here.

Curiously, the KFC cup features the white rapper Jack Harlow from the present day. Harlow as a musical poet comes after Eminem, a rapper who made his name against the unspoken law that white people cannot be rappers, because rap is rooted in African American culture. Uncle Ben, as a racist stereotype, was removed from rice labeling in the past few years. Nevertheless, Jack Harlow is somewhere between kitsch and camp, and regardless Williams places this *beneath* Uncle Ben's can — regardless of the violation of superposition they create by starting with older objects on the bottom and newer ones at the top. Williams asks whether this more subliminal, more implicit racism of the present day is any better than the overt goof ups from corporate culture from the 1960's, or just another anachronism. I don't know the answer but I'm right there with them.



Conclusions

The exhibition *Politics as Usual* by artist Elzie Williams III refers to seemingly intractable, insoluble problems like Black Lives Matter, Climate Change, and even a cruel streak by Baby Boomers and the media that seek to:

1. Trivialize problems;
2. Blame millennials themselves for those problems;
3. Eschew and evade all responsibility, at least before they die and leave everyone else holding the bill.

The artist teases these contradictions, and corporate culture and Baby Boomers are not the only targets in this exhibition. I think the artist has hit some real truths, and they made these works with humor, entertainment, and a solid moral conscience.

What a great show.

Jacob Goldbas is a writer living in Brooklyn, New York. He graduated from North Carolina State University in 2010. In 2013 he won the Washington, DC Jewish Community Center Honorary Mention Award for Excellence in Writing for their Fall Literary Festival. He covers philosophy, art, and popular culture for Facadeaside.