



Elzie Williams III, *Do You Know Where You're Going To?*, 2023. Magazine swatches of Black and brown faces with the color white on reverse, found images, plastic, found objects, acrylic rod, metal, flagpole bracket, and light, 33 x 14 x 12 in. Photo: New Document, Courtesy the artist and M23, New York

Elzie Williams III

July 13, 2023 by Susan Canning

New York

M 2 3

Elzie Williams III cloaks noncompliant perspectives on contemporary culture in the detritus of shopping. His materials are so ubiquitous they could be easily dismissed: QR codes, advertisement cards, magazine and newspaper clippings are pasted onto busts, a shopping bag, and backpack, while recycled objects and memorabilia are assembled into sculptures. Displayed like merchandise, the works in “Politics As Usual” (on view through July 16, 2023) undermine the frivolity of fashion to probe the ways that desire and possession circulate in the world, especially around the Black body.

This contrary positioning begins with the animé-like *Denso-Tron (Prototype)*. Shown on a shelf made from a cardboard box and covered with QR matrix codes (invented by the Japanese company Denso Wave), the bust sets off a virtual babel of competing adverts offering goods and services, mainly for hair and skin. While slyly commenting on the popular practice of using QR codes to market contemporary art, this object, rather than serving as a vehicle for commodity transfer, remains a cipher, the competitive excess of its surface contesting any possibility of purchase or possession. *Eye-Robot (Prototype)* continues this stratagem. Here, the bust resembles a robot complete with antennae. Many sets of eyes, cut up and stitched together to cover the head (which resembles a modern-day Frankenstein) stare back, resisting any acquiring gaze, upending how we look and buy.

Several assemblages sustain the aura of displacement and alienation. In *Monstro*, a small toy Pinocchio figurine has been enclosed in a tower of plastic water bottles. Referencing Carlo Collodi's *The Adventures of Pinocchio* as well as animated films by Disney and Guillermo del Toro, *Monstro* reclaims the narrative of disobedience and failure to follow paternal ambition while making it clear that the boy will never escape the bubble that surrounds and defines him.

In *Mercantile Business*, a stack of items, including a cash register drawer, a 1908 Sears catalogue, an inverted KFC cup (with Colonel Sanders as Jack Harlow), and an Uncle Ben's rice can, topped off by a Tiffany box filled with pulped paper, lays out the ways that the American experience is promoted and marketed to different groups. Another view circulates in *Rumble in the Jungle*, where the juxtaposition of a commemorative plaque of Muhammad Ali's hand and signature with a carpet of National Geographic magazines bears witness to the global presence of the performing Black body and its use as both model and product.

In *If I Ruled The World (Time Traveler Bag)*, a large shopping bag hangs from the ceiling, its surface covered with a collage of cut-out eyes, newspaper articles, QR codes, and found objects, including CDs. While this bag might at first seem to retain its function as a container, its cut and taped-together appearance combines with numerous amulets and needles to ward off any desire for acquisition, projecting instead an abject condition of homeless make-do. *Do You Know Where You're Going To?* queries visibility. A backpack hanging from a rod brings to mind a head covered with a hood or hijab. With the exception of its front flap, the exterior is predominantly white. The dark interior, viewable only through two holes cut in the top, is filled with ads, objects, and images of Black and brown faces and bodies. Placed high up to further discourage visual access, this practical accessory becomes a repository of hidden and inaccessible yearning. Camouflaged as art objects ready for sale, Williams's sculptures and installations assert a provocative polemic. Turning commodity culture on its head, they declare from the margins: no more politics as usual.
