

FLATT *magazine*

May 2012

LORNA WILLIAMS

photography
 CHRISTINA LISSA

interview
 KIKA KARADI

*Kika Karadi interviews Lorna Williams in
 Lorna's Studio in Philadelphia*



Lorna Williams, 26, is a figurative artist hailing from New Orleans who post hurricane, after losing her home, re-located to the North East finally planting her studio-roots in a woodsy suburb of Philadelphia last year. While her spectacular sculptures and conceptual intentions are hard to pin down, in their corporeal form they beget psychosexual currents circling around the focus on the reproductive organs. Much of Williams's work to date has been concerned with this type of re-constitution of her own physical self. As she explained, she primarily uses the female figure because her own body is all she has that is endlessly available to study. Her two most recent series of sculptures, "brown baby" and "redefining womb space," provide an answer to the perverse polymorphic human mind. Offering works that are figurative yet not based on biological determinism, Williams effectively deems things like skin color as an arbitrary, external distinction. This formal detail in the sculptures frees the art from conjuring up a psychological, sociological conditioning toward the ethnographic. These sculptures

communicate a direct, intentional connection to the basis of biological intelligence. There's no sentimentality about the oppression of women, especially black women, and the re-writing of that in the contemporary world. Rather, her pieces are poetic and show respect for the tradition of folk and tribal art, which are referenced successfully to convey the authenticity of an artifact.

In Williams's piece 'trapped,' she lines the internal part of the anatomy representing the walls of the vagina with crystals, calling it "charging areas of the sculpture." I believe she was referring to the material's intensity and therefore to the energy or attention it holds. Alongside wooden artifacts, other materials include metal tubes, shafts and piping like veins, hardware parts sprouting from the sockets of joints, zippers for the parts that open and close. Its structure both conveys meaning and physicality of its diverse material sources. Like any organized system in nature, I think for Williams to feel a piece is complete, it has to sustain a convincing logic and functionality.



FLATT *magazine*

May 2012

In Williams' studio, which she graciously led me through, there is a wood shop on the ground level and a fine-tool section built overhead, where she does her more meticulous work like beading and collaging. A series of storage racks are centrally located for easy access and visibility, furnished with cubbies and neat piles of all varieties of supplies: cross sections of tree trunks, branches, roots and vines, adapter plugs, plumbing hardware, headphones, patterned paper, paint, beads, glass jars, wax, plastic doll parts, bones, small animal carcasses, and fossils. These things all end up in her sculptures at one time or another, carefully fastened, screwed, or interwoven into the final piece.



SKYPE Chat: NYC-Philadelphia

KIKA KARADI: I loved coming to your studio in Phili! The Van Gogh exhibit was on and I was like F that, I wanna see a live artist full of life, blood and ideas!

LORNA WILLIAMS: [laughs] Word, I enjoyed our exchange. It was magical. Great getting to know you. Kindred flow.

KIKA KARADI: Even though we just met, I feel your artwork resonates something so real and lyrical to me that it feels like a relevant connection, not to mention our birthdays are the same!

LORNA WILLIAMS: Exactly! We are so on time.

KIKA KARADI: How long have you been in this studio, and how did you score such an awesome two-part loft?

LORNA WILLIAMS: I have been here since the fall. October. I put my energy out there for it, followed through and rooted. It's been just another step in the healing process. The great "becoming." A place to be. The path I have taken: along the way the thresholds shine and I find myself at another crossroads... growth. I am open to life, not afraid of my emotions and am capable of making space for the intellectual web points. It all unfolds and the challenge is to consider. My father always said, "dream big and invest."

KIKA KARADI: Invest in being! That is a wisdom everyone could use more of in this atmosphere of commerce-is-your-god.

LORNA WILLIAMS: Right, I believe so... to be added to the self-prophesying doctrine. "I see the potential for godliness in everything." We fixate-relate-choose. I do that with sound, color, texture, shape, material... from my perspective(s)' stance with elements, drawn out like equations, haiku, melodies.

KIKA KARADI: And to reinvent is the job of the artist, more than just in the poetic realm. It is physical objects we make in the end. They are physical totems. So, after the devastation of Katrina, having left New Orleans, do you feel that stronger than ever? I mean it's a weird question... Making objects is like "setting roots" as you have expressed. Do you feel fearlessness?

LORNA WILLIAMS: Hmm... Well, my truths—discoveries of process and manifestation: reevaluate, redefine, reinvent, reintroduce—constantly creating what you want to see, making allowances for a dialogue... I guess what I am trying to say is, surrender. Give yourself in, but with consciousness. Feel it all. I have moments of fearfulness, and I take it and use it, examine it. I don't believe it's supposed to be a struggle, but we make it by way of emotions. So everything that has happened to me was and is ultimately

relevant when I give it that space by way of awareness. I enter into that space when I work, allow it for my work. When I play and dance in my studio, I'm fearless in that space. It's my home. Womb spaces are invented. But it does get overwhelming, lonely—by necessity. I only recognize the loneliness when I want to get out, fly, feel light and distracted. Balance it out. I think I do that well (distract myself)—sometimes too well. [laughs]

KIKA KARADI: Describe a great working day in the studio. Music on? What are the sounds?

LORNA WILLIAMS: I come to my studio as is. Sure, I get a motivation and/or have to talk myself into it sometimes, but when I get in it—I'm home. I open up and get into a flow. I look at things and allow for them to speak. Dialogue begins. My inner child gets a space; we sing, dance, cry, embrace it all. And yes, music is my designated passenger. I play whatever resonates: Bjork, Brian Blade, Alice Coltrane, Nina Simone, Fela Kuti, Flying Lotus, Mos Def, to name a few of MANY inspirational guiding forces.

KIKA KARADI: You have a respect and understanding for your materials. It's clear from my visit in person with your works. The process of your placing and organizing, it's like you're re-articulating a sort of hierarchical poetry of what is so important in the biology of the sculpture.

FLATT *magazine*

May 2012

It is how you pump life into your work. It is figurative so you have blood pumping through veins, neurological messages through the spinal cord, etc. It's like you are re-articulating your phenomena of existence in all of its ecological, biological glory. I don't know—you can slap me now! I'm into your work!

LORNA WILLIAMS: You are my reflection...

KIKA KARADI: Explain.

LORNA WILLIAMS: We have similar nuances. Well, we/ I ask a lot of questions of the materials. I invest and research, turn things over, strip them, flip them around as structures, as concepts and notions, as articles of desperation. I make the connections and allow for ideas to flood in. [laughs] I dance with it all...Growing up in New Orleans, I experienced music and dance as forms of expression that allow us to be most in our bodies, to have and own our bodies. I defined this as real freedom. I am New Orleans... I embody its culture and spirit. I look in the mirror, I dance, or I make food. It comes out when I hear my voice, I hear home. I carry this with me always and it comes through everything I do. I come from a street art place—in New Orleans, everyone is an artist. We know how to take shit and make gold. That's something I hold very close to me.

KIKA KARADI: But you are describing a body... Is it a physical portraiture?

LORNA WILLIAMS: Yes, it's partly bodily—I am fascinated by the human form: its structure and function on every level. We have potential beyond imaginable and I desire to know, I seek to discover and shape/shift the many ways of interaction.

Visionary shit. I have a survival-need to out-do, to self destruct and balance out all the living that we just do naturally.

KIKA KARADI: Oh yes, I did notice the direct message of "memento mori" in your work.

LORNA WILLIAMS: What does that mean again?

KIKA KARADI: 'Memento mori' is a Latin phrase translated as "Remember your mortality," "Remember you must die" or "Remember you will die." It refers to a

genre of artworks that vary widely but all share the same purpose: to remind people of their mortality, an artistic theme dating back to antiquity.

LORNA WILLIAMS: Oh yes, transience—within being—constantly dying, embracing it simply by living. I play with death, dead things and as you say "pump life into objects" I collect and collage.

KIKA KARADI: Are you more comfortable with the mirror/ your female form, the female form?

LORNA WILLIAMS: I am very comfortable with my female form but that's not all I see and experience. I guess when I gaze through the lens of societal female roles assigned I reevaluate and add on to the/my notion(s) of being "female" in different spatial dynamics. I question it constantly, I guess.

KIKA KARADI: Let me write something about this sculpture I saw in your studio: a fantastic object of art you made called "foresight." The first thing that hit me about it, besides understanding that it was a little pokey small male figure, precious and standing tall at about 20", it communicated to me your ability to articulate the human anatomy in its own genre of self awareness and prophesy and self mastery. That's the distinct vibe I got. You had successfully created a Frankenstein. [laughs] It was untouchable, and at the same time specimen-like. Tell me the story of when you made "foresight."

LORNA WILLIAMS: Well, "foresight" came out of my desire to enter the male body. I desire to understand and give visual space to my fascination with the male body—all the mysteriousness: the other aspects of "where I come from." I thought a great deal about my father and his role in my life. I am in love with him! He supports me to no end! I am always thinking of the womb and giving visual space to the womb but not the origins or its collaborator.

KIKA KARADI: So tell me more: how did you give it origin, in what way?

LORNA WILLIAMS: A good artist friend, Breck Omar, gave me the headless Samuel Jackson action figure with the golf club

handles attached. He said that he felt it was for me to build from.

KIKA KARADI: Aw, that's precious!

LORNA WILLIAMS: So I sat with it for a long time, and it revealed itself to me and me to it. I was at the same time studying the human sexual reproductive organs and wanting to understand the stages of planting, development, birthing and how I could apply it to everyday life, playing with the notion of returning to the animalistic nature by "creating" it. I tapped into my male energy. My material choices were very precise and carefully chosen, but they also had a way of just fitting: their functionality as man-made or natural objects matched my intentionality in the representation the male sexual organs. It just clicked...like magic. My biggest challenge was figuring out how to connect all of those objects and make it sturdy in form and display. It was really exciting and fun to render.

KIKA KARADI: How about the scale? It's right on!

LORNA WILLIAMS: The objects make up the scale and how they relate and connect to one another.

KIKA KARADI: Yes, you said you often start a piece by just suspending it in your working space in the studio. I guess that



FLATT *magazine*

May 2012

goes for the trunk of the piece, the first internal quality as it were...the skeleton. Très cool.

LORNA WILLIAMS: I just let it happen and feel it—from my gut—and then I envision it and ask what it, “What do you have the potential to speak to and carry?” “What am I placing on you and where does that come from?”

I need to see it from every perspective in order to grasp its potential and then question how from that angle will the concept come across. I recognize bodily experience is a big factor in my viewers’ ability to come in and converse.

KIKA KARADI: But if you were to hang my essence up on a hook in your studio, I know I’d be in a careful and studied conceptual realm. I have no doubt you could build me from scratch up and give it a real life.

LORNA WILLIAMS: [laughs] I like to think so. I would embody you and study you, become you, seek you out, through and through. I love doing that with my friends and musicians. It’s fascinating what happens. We create a world in its own willingness and the unconditional trust and passion—its only by-way of openness and consideration—responsibility with our energies.

KIKA KARADI: Your work has a very genetically and biologically studied existence. It’s not light. I mean, I feel in your work how various materials empower each part of the anatomical story of your sculpture, so the charge in one area could be like an electrical wire that plugs into a joint of a leg or a lamp for the ovaries or typewriter balls, or a crystal-lined vagina. And you seem to work it out into a self-aware mythology of sorts. It’s very impressive, and whatever the viewer’s relation to the piece, it becomes a very poignant transference. It is a bit like voodoo. I don’t like using that analogy but I mean it in a different way: it is like super positive voodoo. Like I interact with your work and leave with a fulfilled and satisfied feeling, it is discernibly positive. [laughs] I guess I’m trying to describe the meeting of the physicality of your art.

LORNA WILLIAMS: It’s more like a form of shamanism. I would say it’s not light but does embody the force of light. I am creating a mythology, making visual my way(s) of experiencing and gathering. It brings me joy for you to have that experience, make those connections—allowing for influence. I consider everything, so I want folks who encounter my work to do the same with my work and of themselves when engaging it. Feel it, not just think it. Operate from other places of their body— spirit, intellect. Meet me there and everywhere.

Born in New Orleans, Louisiana, Lorna Williams attended NOCCA/Riverfront (New Orleans Center for Creative Arts), a magnet high school in New Orleans. She recently graduated from MICA (Maryland Institute College of Art) with a BFA during which she spent a semester at Yale University as the Ellen Battell Stockel fellowship recipient. Williams is represented by Dodge Gallery on the Lower East Side of New York City. She’s been reviewed by The New York Times, Art in America, and the Boston Globe to mention some.

Kika Karadi (b. 1975) is a New York based painter. Karadi’s bold, large-format “Black Ink” paintings are recognized throughout the United States and Europe for their majestic gravitas. Her work has been mounted in such historically important exhibitions as: The Prague Biennale, Expanded Painting Section, and the 51st Venice Biennale-Museo Storico Navale. Some other museum exhibitions include; Atrium-Centro, Museo Vasco De Arte Contemporaneo, Spain, and Centre Pasquart, Kunsthau Centre D’Arte, Switzerland. Reviews about Karadi’s work may be found in various publications including Artforum, Flash Art, Miami Herald, and The Art Newspaper.