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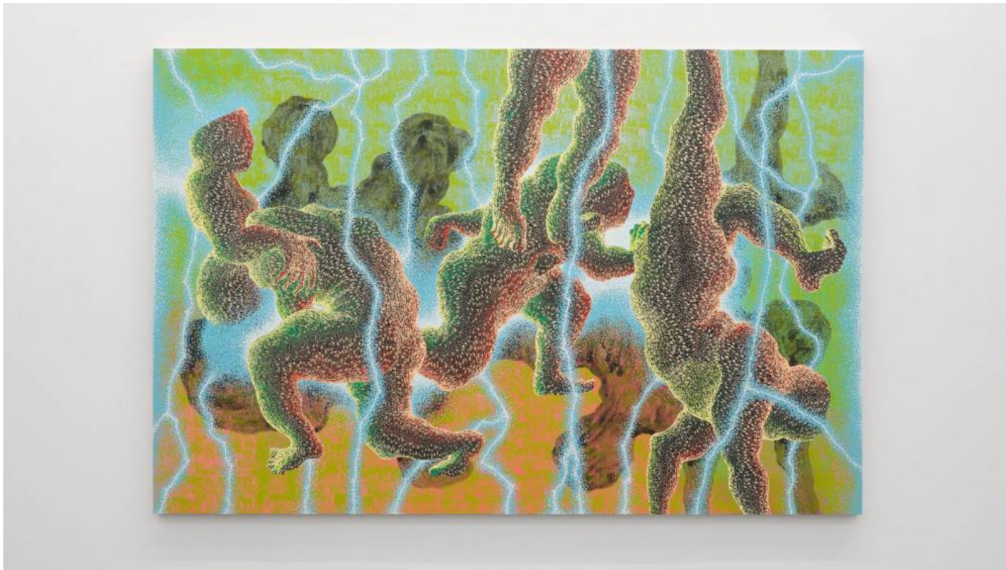
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Hotchkiss, Sarah, "Didier William's 'Siklon' Sizzles With Stormy Energy," *KQED*, October 4, 2021

————— THE DO LIST

## **Didier William's 'Siklon' Sizzles With Stormy Energy**



Didier William, 'Siklon 2,' 2021; Acrylic, ink, wood carving on panel, 68 x 104 inches. (Courtesy of the artist and Altman Siegel, San Francisco)

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Here's a fun game: Browse the digital images of a show, specifically a show of art with an intriguing materials list. The list says, "This art has layers, textures and different finishes." The images say, "This art is flat." Fix those images in your memory, in their two-dimensional, pixel-generated state, their scale shrunk by the size of your screen. Then visit them in real life, and thrill to the feeling of complete misunderstanding. Stand in front of something you once thought of as having really no size at all, which now stretches over eight-and-a-half-feet wide. Understand the order of operations, the steps that went into making this surface not a slick, easily reproducible thing, but an object of tangible, visible labor.

*Siklon*, Didier William's first solo show at Altman Siegel, draws from the artist's experience of growing up in Miami after immigrating with his family from Port-au-Prince, Haiti as a child. It is one of those "stand back, take it in, get close, marvel some more" experiences. Accordingly, this is a "you really have to see these in person" plea.



Didier William, '84 Corolla,' 2021; Acrylic, ink, wood carving on panel, 52 x 70 inches. (Courtesy of the artist and Altman Siegel, San Francisco)

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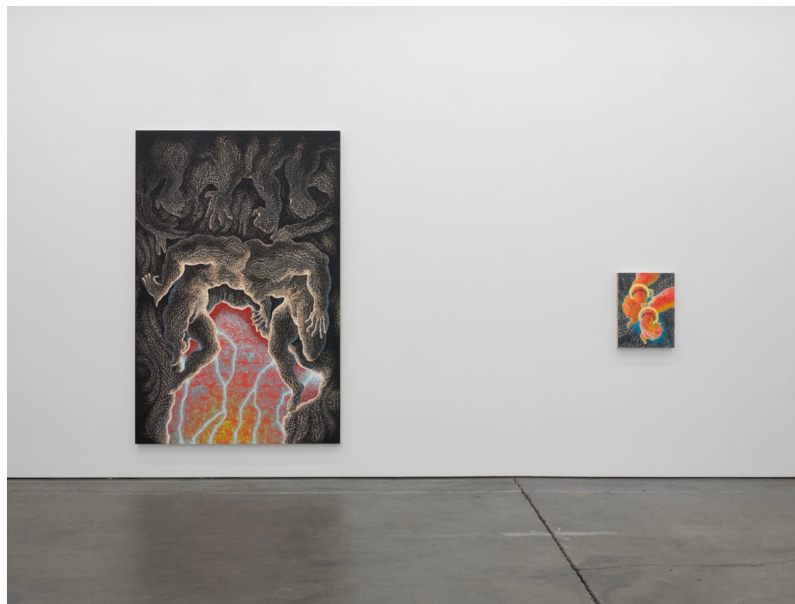
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The artist's paintings involve carved wood, shadowy washes, hand-printed patterns, whiskers of color, and sometimes, additional layers of collage. I'm tempted to describe each layer that (I think) goes into a work on panel, but part of the pleasure of visiting *Siklon* is puzzling through what at first seems like a relatively straightforward pointilist painting, then resolves into a complex combination of mark-making that creates both a whole image *and* a system of adjacent and overlapping patterns.

Throughout the show, William's figures are demarcated from their surroundings by a motif of eyes shallowly carved into each painting's panel. Eyes curve around heads and legs, arms and hands, morphing to connote the three-dimensional heft of a body. What does it mean to be a body made of eyes? Looking out in every possible direction, William's figures are both watchful and watched. They take in the details of their environments in a way we can only approximate by peering closely at the artworks that depict them, stepping away and peering closely again.



Installation view of 'Siklon' with 'Dimbulah's Cave,' 2021 at left and 'Apprehended Without Incident 5,' 2021 at right. (Courtesy of the artist and Altman Siegel, San Francisco)

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The exception to this rule is *Apprehended Without Incident 5*, a smaller work on panel that shows two handcuffed arms, a shadow circling each wrist like a bruise. Here, the eyes form the painting's background: watching both the police force doing the apprehending and the person being apprehended.

In the show's title pieces, *Siklon 1 (Hurricane)* and *Siklon 2*, lumpy, featureless figures contort acrobatically amid vertical streaks of electric blue. It's as if a strobe light—or a lightning flash—has captured them mid-celebration. These are moments filled with possibility, despite the ominous associations that usually come from the paintings' shared name, a Haitian Kreyòl word for "hurricane." William proposes the hurricane as a symbol for transformation and renewal in the Caribbean—a force of such power it might trump even the effects of anti-Black international interference over the past two centuries.

In William's depictions, the electricity of a storm becomes a resource. One of his figures gathers up crackling blue light like a recharging superhero. A rocky opening shadowed by Atlas-like bodies reveals a chamber of pure energy. Zig-zagging streaks surround two figures locked in a passionate embrace.



Installation view of 'Siklon' with 'Chita nan Mango Yo (Sit Inside the Mangos)', 2021 at left and 'Stolen Mangos', 2021 at right. (Courtesy of the artist and Altman Siegel, San Francisco)

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In contrast to these high drama, stormy scenarios, *Siklon* also includes two paintings of figures cavorting among the lush greenery of mango trees, and another based on Édouard Manet's *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (*Luncheon on the grass*). (William's 90's *Dejeuner* has everyone clothed in squeeze-bottle-applied strokes of vibrant acrylic paint.) In all three, William adds yet another artistic method to his toolbox, rendering leaves and fruit in thick, painterly brushstrokes and adding yet another texture to his surfaces.

Carved, squeezed, painted—I haven't even gotten to William's use of relief prints. In the spaces between his figures and natural elements, William repeats simple patterns of vines, leaves, and in one instance, a snake. But as the background of a painting shifts from green to orange, those printed elements keep their hue, sometimes creating moments of sizzling simultaneous contrast. Less visible than streaks of lightning, this is still a form of electricity; it builds up in the friction of two colors sitting next to each other.

In one of my favorite pieces in the show, William renders even the banality of a sandal raised to squash a roach as a thrilling noir moment. Here, the repeated print in *Ravet* (*Roach*) functions as wallpaper, while vertical bands of shadow roll over the insect's back, the grasped flip-flop and the figure's forearm. That same tension, those same dense and overlapping material choices are present throughout *Siklon*, but this small moment underscores how William approaches a great expanse of human activity, from the mundane to epic, as worthy of repeated, meticulous attention.