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ARTnews

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Didier William Is Using His Art to Offer Black, Queer Immigrants Hope



Didier Willam: *Mosaic Pool*, Miami, 2021, acrylic, collage, ink, and wood carving on panel, 68 by 104 inches.

COURTESY MOCA NORTH MIAMI

The city of Miami is home to the largest Haitian population outside Haiti. Artist **Didier William**, who was born in Haiti, was raised in North Miami, making him one of many immigrants from the island to call it home. There, William picked up his Haitian mother's medications at a local Walgreens and worked at the dollar store down the street from the Museum of Contemporary Art North Miami.

That institution is now about to open William's largest exhibition to date, with more than 40 paintings, sculptures, drawings, and prints set to go on view on December 1. Titled "Nou Kite Tout Sa Dèyè" ("We've Left That All Behind" in Haitian Creole), the exhibition is notably *not* a homecoming, according to William, who is now based in Philadelphia.

"The irony of the exhibition title is that you can never leave it all behind. It follows you and is sort of imprinted onto you," William said in an interview, adding, "It points to something that is a reality for all of us who move from one place, especially from one country, to another—that your cultural DNA stays with you."

Referencing both William's immigrant experience and the physical journey he took to get to the U.S., curator **Erica Moiah James** said, "The show is designed as a pathway," one that offers "multiple points of entry" into William's multimedia practice.

Beginning with new artist books in the lobby and moving to a documentary about William's family history by Emmy-nominated filmmaker Marlon Johnson, the exhibition considers the notion of home. New paintings of the first two houses in which William remembers living in Miami are set in a dark, intimate space. Notably, however, these are not the first places William and his family lived in North Miami. The artist aimed to portray the homes as accurately as possible, yet he also added a surreal touch: the structures are shown nestled among a sea of limbs.

William's works, which are often made in series, draw on his own memory. They weave in the 39-year-old artist's own recollections about immigration and Haitian religion while also speaking to broader themes related to Black and queer communities. Questions of belonging, the negotiation of new spaces and identities, and perseverance in times of personal struggle are at the forefront.

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With a background in printmaking, William used to collage onto the surface of his paintings; now, however, he often prints directly onto the canvas using a relief block. These printed patterns are intended to recall Haiti, which William and his family left in 1989. They are drawn from “our curtains, throw blankets, pillows, and bedsheets that my mom brought with us,” William said. Many of these objects were displayed around his childhood home in Miami.

“In the paintings, when [these patterns] show up, they appear as the material artifacts in the actual spaces themselves—as the architecture, as the walls, as the landscape, and as the furniture,” he explained. The patterns, he continued, “make up the literal ground that the narrative [of the piece] is sitting in.”

William describes his first two remembered homes in Miami as “containers” for life events—they were places to live while applying for citizenship, receptacles for items like cassette tapes sent from family back in Haiti, and sites to rest when sick—and the entangled bodies he depicts do not merely represent what happened to him. Instead, they conjure a mix of remembered events and perceived history.

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Installation view of Didier William's 2022 exhibition "Nou Kite Tout Sa Dèyè" ("We've Left That All Behind") at **MOCA North Miami**.

PHOTO MICHAEL R. LOPEZ. COURTESY MOCA NORTH MIAMI

A new 12-foot-tall sculpture takes the form of a *potomitan* (central pole), typically made from a tree trunk, that is an essential structural feature of the Haitian vodou *hounfour* (temple). In vodou, it is believed that, through the *potomitan*, *loa* (spirits) can descend through earth to contact the faithful.

Though William's *potomitan* doesn't touch the ground, the carved figures echo the writhing figures depicted throughout his paintings. As the sculpture hangs suspended between the earthly and spiritual realms, there exists the possibility—and perhaps even the hope—of transcendence.

As a Black, queer immigrant in the United States, a mid-career showing of William's oeuvre is perhaps as much a testament to perseverance as much as it is to occupying space—which has become all the more difficult in a country that has had its fair share of anti-Black violence as well as legislation that has disenfranchised immigrants and the LGBTQ+ community. William seemed to acknowledge this when he said, “This country has always grappled with immigrants and belonging from its inception. And I don't think that conversation will ever end.”

The museum has organized the show with an eye toward the city's own immigrant community. Some 250 prints by William will be to North Miami immigrants in the community—many of whom can't afford to purchase a William piece, according to James—during the course the show.

Those visiting the exhibition can expect to experience an overarching connection between the personal and historical—an “ecosystem of the ways in which immigrant identity is constructed, and also a meditation on the impossibility of making identity into a kind of rigid system,” William explained.

Ultimately, “everything is about life,” James says. “When people are struggling to stay above water, they're *just* above the surface.”

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Didier William: *Ma Tante Toya*, 2017, ink, collage, and wood carving on panel, 64 by 50 inches.
COURTESY MOCA NORTH MIAMI

One way William has been able to accomplish that is by reclaiming well-known images that have gained a place in the canon and make them his own. Among them is Jacques-Louis David's *Death of Marat* (1793), which depicts a murdered revolutionary lying in a bathtub. In William's reimagining of it, titled *Ma Tante Toya* (2017), a female figure clad in a continuous pattern pulls herself out of the bathtub with a machete in hand. Her neck bends almost impossibly to the left, and she stares at the viewer with a menacing gaze. Unlike David's version, there is no doubt that William's figure is very much alive.

Even in William's reimagining of Jacques-Louis David's *Death of Marat*, "his figure is a resurrected female from the Haitian revolution," James continued. "She is carrying her machete. He has completely remade this entire work and its meaning in art history."