

# ALTMAN SIEGEL

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## CULTURED

Kern, Katie, "Here Are 11 Exhibitions You Can't Miss While in San Francisco For FOG," *Cultured Magazine*,  
January 20, 2025

### Here Are 11 Exhibitions You Can't Miss While in San Francisco For FOG

When you have a moment to step outside the fair, make sure to put one (or all) of  
these shows on your to-do list.



Didier William, *It's Safest Through the Fire*, 2024. Image courtesy of the artist and Altman Siegel.

**"Beyond the Bodies' Edge" by Didier William**

**Where:** Altman Siegel

**When:** Through February 22

**Why It's Worth A Look:** As a Haitian immigrant who grew up in Miami and now lives in Philadelphia, Didier William uses both wildlife and landscapes of his own construction to explore complex narratives of cultural belonging. Populating the pieces are the artist's signature shadowy figures, just human-like enough to reflect our own feelings and behaviors.

**Know Before You Go:** In one piece, William goes a different direction by inscribing text into wood. *Steel yourself*, as it reads, was crafted shortly after the 2024 presidential election.

# FRIEZE

Diehl, Travis, "Didier William Paints a Diasporic Dreamscape of the Bayou," *Frieze*, November 12, 2024

## Didier William Paints a Diasporic Dreamscape of the Bayou

For Prospect.6 New Orleans, the artist crafts a vision of the Haitian diaspora through the history and resilience of Louisiana's ancient cypress trees



BY TRAVIS DIEHL IN PROFILES | 12 NOV 24



In October of last year, the artist Didier William took a boat tour through the Louisiana Bayou. He'd been invited to contribute a new project to the Prospect.6 triennial, and had a hunch that the confluence of African, Afro-Caribbean and European cultures in the New Orleans area might connect the region's history with his own experience of the Haitian diaspora. William was born in Haiti, the first free Black republic, although his family left when he was six – he was raised in Miami and now lives in Philadelphia. He notes that Louisiana only became part of the United States after Napoleon Bonaparte was forced to sell it to recoup losses 'suffered at the hands of enslaved West Africans' in the Haitian Revolution.

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What struck him were the cypress knees. Plying the bog, William noticed what he first took for immature or broken stumps: stalagmite-like structures pushing up from the submerged roots of cypress trees. 'Their function is enigmatic in the scientific community,' he tells me. The more he thought about the cypress, the way they adapt to water or land using survival strategies we can't fathom, suggested a historical scope of another order. 'The wider the base, the older the tree,' he says of the cypress's distinctive flared trunks, 'and many have been around for over 1000 years, which means that they are a sort of geographical witness.' These steadfast, silent trees could lend perspective to the region's human history, in all its hope and violence.



Didier William, 'Prospect.6: Gesture to Home', exhibition view. Courtesy: the artist and Prospect.6 New Orleans; photograph: Amber Shields

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Over the last decade, William has developed a vocabulary of figures and motifs to describe his energetic concept of immigrant life: warbling silhouettes, spangled with eyes, carved into the wooden panel so densely that they resemble cells or particles charged with sight. *Dancing, Pouring, Crackling, Mourning* (2015) depicts a theatre stage, the gold curtain richly patterned with devils, where an eye-wrapped figure struggles against or mingles with two shadowy pairs of arms. In *Ma Tante Toya* (2016), an eye-figure poses on a pallet with a realistically rendered machete.

'In the earlier paintings, and even some of the more recent paintings,' William explains, 'by the time you get close enough to realize that these actually are carved eyes on the surface, you also subsequently realize that they're looking back at you just as closely as you're looking at them.' The eyes emerged, William continues, 'as a way for the figures to return the gaze back on to the viewer and to insist upon the circuitry of looking.' The eyes are a sort of armour against the possessiveness of sight. They define the figures as active, motivated parts of tangles of woodblock-patterned fabrics and reaching limbs.



Didier William, 'Prospect.6: Gesture to Home', exhibition view. Courtesy: the artist and Prospect.6 New Orleans; photograph: Amber Shields

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When solid objects – a machete, a cutting board – cut through the miasma, it can be a jarring return to reality. A pair of paintings from 2022, *83rd St.* and *125th St.*, depict houses William's family had in Haiti and Miami. Their mint and cantaloupe walls are straightforward enough, painted with architectural precision; the foliage above the flat roofs, though, ignites with Van Gogh strokes. Where the lawns would be, reality drops off, and clutching wads of eye-clad arms and legs unfurl like unearthed roots.

'Everything I know about Haiti is either researched, or told by my two older brothers and my mom and dad,' William says solemnly. 'In some ways, the characters become the people that have populated my dreams and fantasies for the last 36 years.'

William's work doesn't dwell on loss. Instead, as he puts it, 'I don't want to talk about the traumatic state of Black and Brown people who have been robbed of their homeland and now roam the globe looking for white spaces to live in.' Instead he's invested in 'thinking about the agency that can be nurtured and indulged for people who don't have direct relationships to the geography.' Formally, this informs the 'anti-gravity' suffusing his paintings. Bodies bend and float through voids, curl underground, or explode through space. They're unbound, maybe, by condescending narratives of displacement. They're also free of traditional notions of home, of the 'implied stability of geography as a site of origin.' Rather than pine for the old world, they 'rebuild life.'

Such existential optimism runs throughout William's work. In *Godforsaken Asylum* (2017), eyes emerge from a ground of writhing strokes to form the words 'WE WILL WIN.' The painting has the declarative truth of the 'I AM A MAN' signs from the American Civil Rights protests. It speaks with human energy. And it's maybe the clearest declaration in William's work of who his figures are, what they stand for. For *Prospect.6*, William imagined the cypress knees as transhistorical vehicles for this eye-dense energy. 'What if the characters and the bodies that are subterranean, that are part of this enmeshed history and relationship between the United States and Haiti, are actually being contained in the cypress knees?' In the final sculptures, several metres tall and carved all over with eyes, figures plunge upwards from tapering mounds, buttressed like the trunks of ancient cypress.

*Main image: Portrait of Didier William. Courtesy: the artist and Prospect.6 New Orleans; photograph: Ryan Collerd*

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# MoMA

Sánchez González, Julián and Didier William, "Didier William: Opaque Bodies/Spiritual Futures," *MoMA Magazine*, November 6, 2023



## Didier William: Opaque Bodies/Spiritual Futures

**The Haitian American artist reflects on his recent work and MoMA's collection of Haitian art.**

Julián Sánchez González, Didier William  
Nov 6, 2023

This year, MoMA's [Cisneros Institute](#) embarked on a new research project: [Bridging the Sacred: Spiritual Streams in Twentieth Century Latin American and Caribbean Art, 1920–1970](#). Artists and specialists from Latin America and the Caribbean will convene in a series of conversations, gatherings, and publications around modern art and spirituality, with a particular focus on Afro-diasporic, Indigenous, occult, Jewish, and Catholic traditions.

As part of a series of interviews related to this project, we spoke with Haitian American artist Didier William. We invited Didier to reflect on his recent work and exhibitions, as well as on MoMA's collection of modern Haitian art. In this conversation, the artist takes us through the challenges of collecting and exhibiting Caribbean art and artists, including work grounded in the Vodou religion. His view reaffirms and reclaims art practices and spiritual beliefs that had been hidden in order to survive, and that are now finding public appreciation in the Caribbean and beyond.



Didier William. *Foto Mitan 2*. 2022

**Julián Sánchez González: Haitian art and artists have been claiming more visibility and space in the contemporary art world. What's your perception of Caribbean and Haitian art collection building over the course of the last decades?**

**Didier William:** This begs the question of what museums think the Caribbean is, and the kind of othering that gets projected on the Caribbean. Having said that, I think that it is amazing and impressive to see more and more institutions today becoming interested in the richness, the histories, and stories that come out of the Caribbean. I am thinking about artists who are making work about mythology, science, geography, and politics, which is a shift away from the typical depictions of a beach scene or women with large baskets on their heads or men with machetes cutting down sugar cane. Or, conversely, about the blighted postcolonial wasteland that the West often thinks we inhabit. There is this full spectrum in between that presents a complex humanity that is not just about a Western gaze on a tropical paradise. As someone who was born in the Caribbean, in Haiti, but grew up in the US, I am looking at what happens to a Haitianess, a Caribbeaness, that is not bound by geography. What are the historical, mythological, personal, maybe even cosmic resonances that stay and that get built up when nationhood and geography are partially taken away? How do we find a truth in that? It is encouraging to see museums starting to do this work as well.

**Vodou religion has been at the center of Haitian cultural expression. How has the understanding of Vodou changed?**

When my family moved to the United States in 1989, no one was affirmatively identifying themselves as Haitian in South Florida. You simply didn't talk about Vodou. Even today, conservative Haitians blame Vodou for the country's struggles. But then there are those of us who see it as an intrinsic, very intimate part of who we are on a cellular level. Vodou can't be disentangled from how you understand Haiti and its history as the largest colony of Blacks stolen from the African continent, an aspect critical to its success as a sugar plantation. Enslaved Africans maintained the worship rituals that they brought with them, allowing them to have a sense of community and collective identity in the face of the horrors of colonization inflicted by the French, British, Germans, and Americans. That was the path to salvation and liberation for Haiti, so you can't remove Vodou from the country's identity and expect to understand Haiti and its trajectory since 1791, when the Revolution began.

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This religion is intimately tied to who we are personally and nationally. This intimacy crosses collective and individual boundaries, and in some cases also serves as a container and archive for historical, familiar, and personal memory, even after death. My piece *Poto Mitan 2*, which is a sculpture at a recent Museum of Contemporary Art North Miami exhibition is about this very idea. The body acts as the historical container that builds up the *poto*, or pole center. This would normally be something like a living tree, but in my work it was a tower of bodies that hovered in the middle of the exhibition. For my family, and for many families that emigrated to the United States and elsewhere in the West, the *poto mitan* illustrates how we retain our sense of self and our proximity to those who have passed.



Préfète Duffaut.  
*Sin*. 1953

**MoMA's collection includes mid-20th-century paintings and sculptures by major Haitian artists. What kind of sentiments, for instance, do works like Préfète Duffaut's *Sin* evoke in you?**

When looking at this painting, the idea of holding this monumental moment in spirituality and religion as a small worship object is really interesting to me. I'm also thinking about Erzulie a lot when I look at this work, particularly Erzulie Danto, the motherly *loa*, or spirit of love, in the Vodou religion—as this phenomenal romantic figure, but also as a tragic, vengeful figure who sits pretty heavily in a lot of my work. It is interesting that the ground in the painting is so one-dimensional, when the rest of the painting becomes almost a tessellation, pieced together like a puzzle. I find myself going back to that sense of deep, heavy gravity in the work, which is pulling down the branches, literally holding down the figures, whereas everything else is flamboyant and expressive.



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## What are your thoughts on Jacques-Enguerrand Gourgue's *Magic Table*?

I love this one because earlier on I was thinking about the characters or figures in my paintings being creatures more than humans, something larger. In an essay, Zoé Samudzi called them "titans," which I really loved. In Haiti, and in Haitian Vodou especially, during worship and ceremony, the belief is that the body transcends into another space that allows it more agency, more liberation, more ability. There is a sense that the body can subvert gravity and perform superhuman acts, and this painting takes me there at every level. There is this main event, but then as you zoom in closer and closer to different parts of the work, there are equally epic sub-narratives taking place within all the characters. I'm very impacted by this painting; it stuck with me.

## Can you say more about the notion of bodily transgression in these works, as well as in your work?

It is interesting to think about imagining alternative states of being for anyone whose body has been criminalized, and not just in the context of the Caribbean, but for those of us who have tried to occupy bodies that have not been able to live freely in real time. A piece of mine, *Kisa n'ap fe ansamn*, which means "what we would make together," comes to mind. This is a painting that I finished around November of 2019, when my husband and I were expecting our daughter, with the help of a surrogate, which was a moment when I was thinking a lot about the union that was bringing this new person into the world. There was a beautiful way in which our bodies and the surrogate's body had to transgress the conventions assigned to them and bring this new life into being. This sat with me for a long time and I thought about how I wanted to make a painting about it. But knowing how I work, I wasn't going to sit my husband down and make a portrait of him or me. So, what came to mind was these two figures joined at the arms and the legs, and in the center was this glowing heart-shaped energy—one of the most sentimental paintings I've made. It reflected the same idea—of the body moving beyond itself and doing something for itself, its perpetuity, its futurity.



Didier William. *Kisa n'ap fe ansamn*. 2020



Didier William. *Baptism: We Cannot Drown, Nou Beni*. 2022

*Baptism: We Cannot Drown, Nou Beni* is a work where I was thinking about the Caribbean Sea, a body of water between Haiti and the United States, as a type of baptismal space. Instead of claiming the many bodies it has claimed on their journey to flee their country, this water becomes a superhuman fluid that actually produced titans or superhuman characters who could withstand something like myriad bolts of lightning.

In *Dezabiye 2*, on the other hand, the characters are beginning to uncloak their sight and they are beginning to present themselves without an armor of eyes, the motif my work is mostly known for. The eyes aren't disappearing, they are becoming this other interlocutor, a kind of second character that the bodies can interact with and speak back to, becoming one of my first paintings of this nature. I started to think about the expulsion of energy that would happen when they are able to do that. What would it look like if these characters, who have been secured with this chainmail of eyes for a long time, finally removed it? Are they removing this armor willingly, intentionally? Are they encountering us when they remove it, or are they encountering each other?

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**In Haitian modern art, depictions of nature play an important role, as is the case in Wilson Bigaud's *Murder in the Jungle*. Do you find a resonance between this work and your Cursed Grounds series?**

Connection to nature in Haitian art is well documented and researched. I find that Haitian artists have represented nature as an ally, and not necessarily as an adversary. I think of my own recent paintings depicting nature—which I sometimes call “groundscapes” instead of “landscapes”—as the continuation of that conversation. The Cursed Grounds series looks at spaces that have a deep history, and often these paintings don't have any figures or characters in them—the character is the landscape and the ground. The first in the series looks at the Atchafalya Basin in New Orleans, part of the Louisiana Purchase territory, and its relationship to the Haitian Revolution. In the subsequent paintings, I have been looking at a few different spaces, including Lorimer Park in Pennsylvania, where we spent time with our daughter at the beginning of the pandemic. In some ways I am looking at the aftermath of scenes similar to the one represented in this Bigaud painting. What happens many generations later, when the space has been regrounded, replanted, gentrified, turned into luxury high-rises and manicured parks? How does this subterranean history remain? How do we continue these conversations about landscapes and nature, and about ground specifically? I am still thinking along those lines and looking at new spaces. I actually flew back down to New Orleans in October to do some more research around this idea.



Wilson Bigaud. *Murder in the Jungle*. 1950



Didier William. *Cursed Grounds: Cursed Borders*. 2021

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**What is your perception of art-making in Haiti today as it relates to Vodou beliefs and practices? What would be some of the benefits and perhaps some of the risks of tapping into this particular source of creativity?**

I think the risk is being illegible, right? Though I would also ask, who are we trying to make ourselves legible to? We can think about Édouard Glissant and his affirmation of opacity in order to affirm ourselves to ourselves and for ourselves. I struggle to think about what the risk is there because in all the artists who we have mentioned, as well as other artists who are currently working, I am seeing thoughtful and creative makers who are opening up the narrative about who we are beyond the rigid institutional narratives that do not tell the full story and, in fact, represent a system of erasures more than any authoritative narrative.

A lot of these artists are thinking about mythology, fantasy, and storytelling, and so I think that there is a collective awareness that the world is in environmental, political, and economic trouble, and this is opening us up to think about potential futures in a way that hopefully gives us an alternative. It is no surprise to me that artists are looking to fantastical storytelling and mysticism, because these things that have been stigmatized in the past are actually making us more human than the rigid lies we have been holding on to for life. These are the lies that have left us with a climate crisis, the entire world making a hard-right turn, and poverty that we could not have imagined. We need to look at other modes of being, because that is what might save us and preserve the planet for our children. I don't think this impulse is unique to Haitian artists or Caribbean artists; I think everybody is doing it.

**Julián Sánchez González**

Cisneros Institute  
Research Fellow

**Didier William**

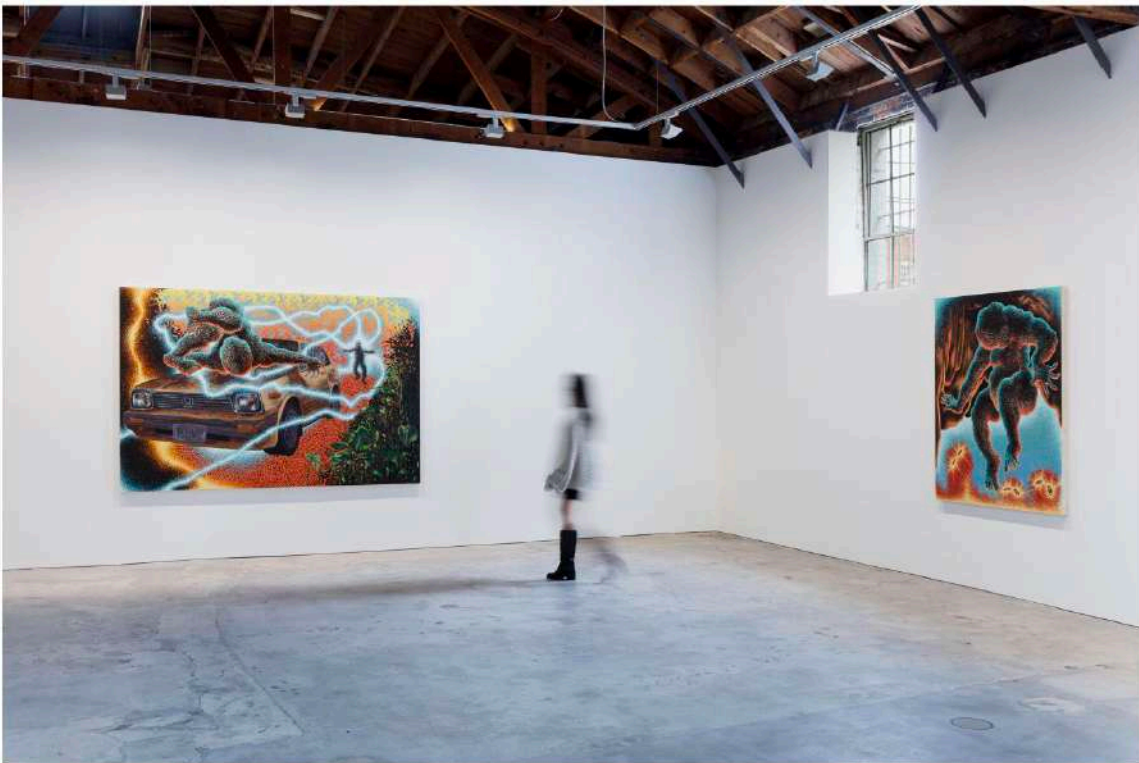
Artist

# CULTURED

Díaz, Devan, "Artist Didier William Wants Surprise, Not Closure, From The Canvas," *Cultured*, May 5, 2023

## Artist Didier William Wants Surprise, Not Closure, From The Canvas

The painter is set to inaugurate the new Los Angeles location of James Fuentes gallery with his show "Things Like This Don't Happen Here."



Didier William, "Things Like This Don't Happen Here" (Exhibition View), 2023. All images courtesy of the artist and James Fuentes.

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"Catharsis isn't a debt that my work owes me," says the artist Didier William. He's referring to the 14 paintings that make up his next show, "Things Like This Don't Happen Here," set to inaugurate the Los Angeles outpost of New York's James Fuentes gallery. Here, we see an ensemble of mythological characters cast by William to portray scenes from personal and familial histories, with all the gaps and mysteries inherent to recollection. Looking back, he's seeking to be surprised, or reminded, of forgotten details. "That is the fairest role of the artwork," he says. "To expect it to heal me is unfair."



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The title came to William after his exhibition at the Museum Of Contemporary Art North Miami, the largest survey of the artist's work thus far. The museum is 10 minutes from William's parents' home and two doors up from the dollar store that employed him in high school. Coming out of the MOCA North Miami show, all the stories that came rushing back to William were personal anecdotes from growing up in a new country. He says of those early years: "We packed up, left Haiti, and left behind our friends and family. Our anchors were these critical moments where real decisions had to be made." *Things like this don't happen here* is a rhetorical device we use to explain the inexplicable; a stroke of luck or tragedy. A phrase that places you on the outside of an experience.



Didier William, *Plonje (Dive)*, 2023.

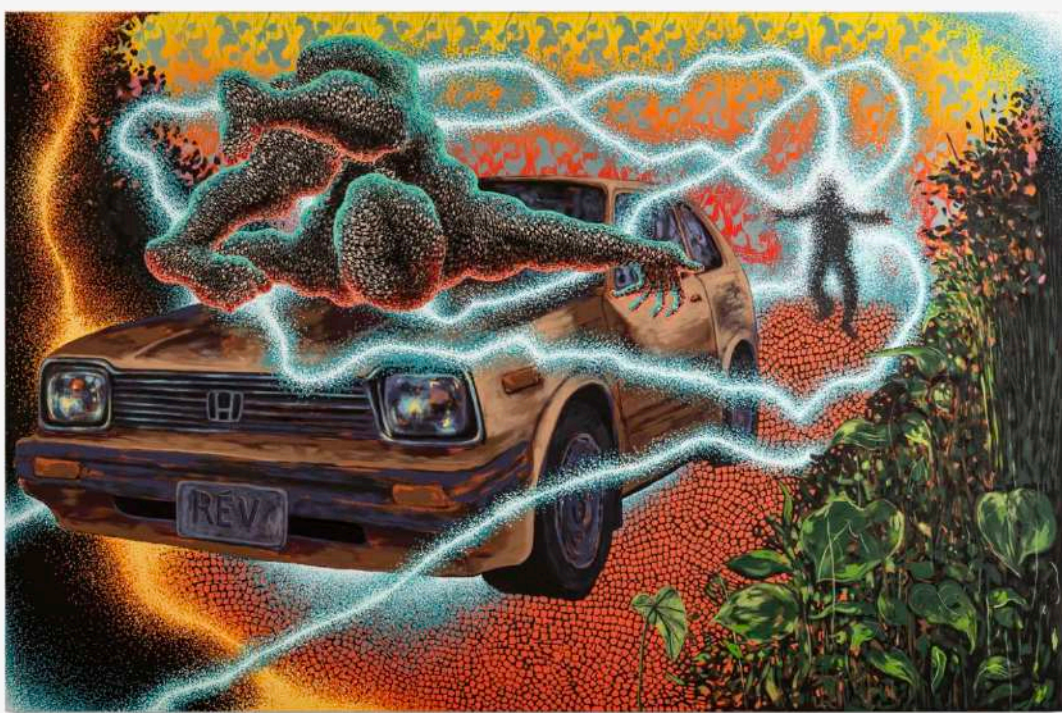
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And then there is the work: paint and collage layered on top of wood carvings on panels like a musical score, mapping out a rhythm. The characters are not quite human, and often weightless: free from gravity, nation, and flesh. In the painting *Plonje (Dive)*, 2023, we see three titans in a subterranean environment, as if a camera has turned down from above to watch these figures in their graceful contortions.



Didier William, *My Father's Nightmares: 40mph*, 2023.

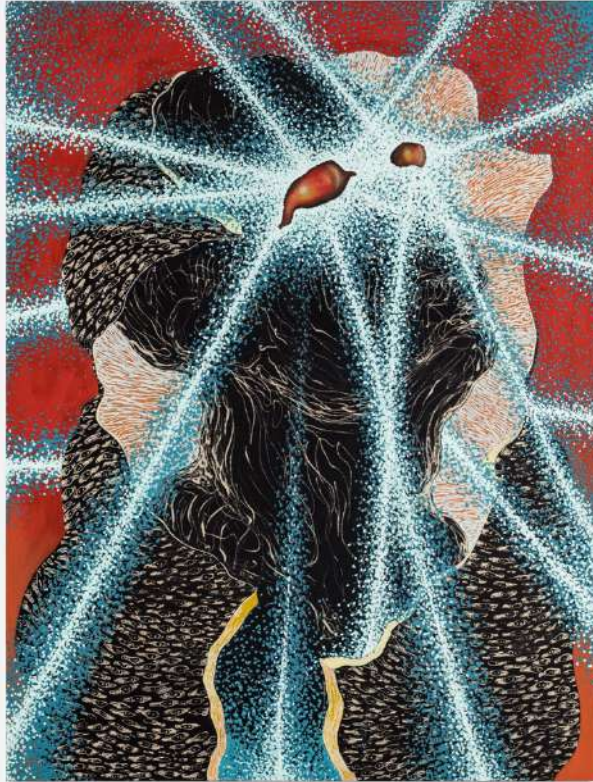
The lightness of this painting crashes against *My Father's Nightmares: 40mph*, 2023, a memory of a car colliding with a twelve-year-old William as his father helplessly looks on. "I haven't talked to my dad about that painting," William says, "but I guarantee it would deviate in part [from his memory]. The painting presents a tertiary example, not one that I, my father, or the pain of that experience owns." The work becomes its own experience separate from the event, one that viewers can take ownership of.

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Didier William, *Dezabiye: a Supple Burning Glare*, 2023.

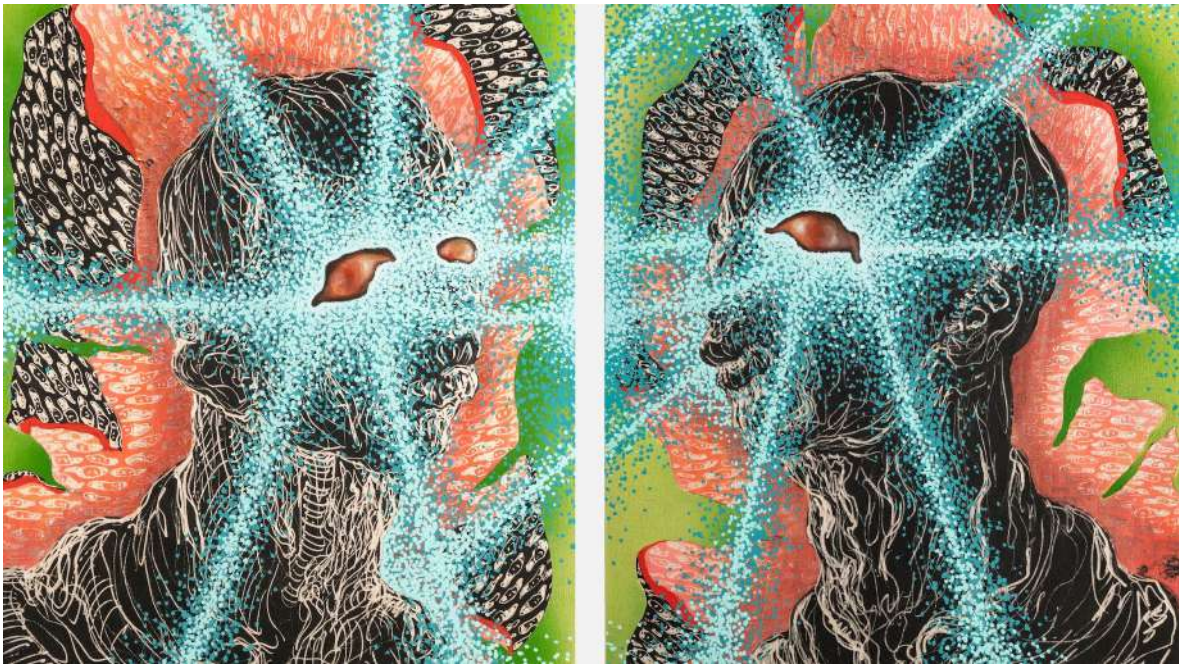
During the last decade, bodies began to appear in William's work. "I never wanted to paint a conventional, naturalistic body," he says. "It felt too reductive and overly simplistic." The resulting figures were coated in hundreds of eyes, watching us watch them. The eyes speak to the Black diasporic experience and the armor needed for protection from constant surveillance. But now, with this show, we are beginning to see what's underneath them. In *Dezabiye: a Supple Burning Glare*, 2023, two distinct glowing eyes and a hint of a mouth burst upwards at God, or their reflection, for the first time. "The cloak they've held is starting to break open," says William, "and they can speak with [their mouths] and realize they're an element of themselves, but not their totality."

*"Things Like This Don't Happen Here"* will be on view from May 6 through June 17, 2023 at James Fuentes in Los Angeles.



# i-D

Rosa, Margarita Lila, “A painter reimagines his Haitian childhood through magical realism,” *i-D*, May 5, 2023



ART

## A painter reimagines his Haitian childhood through magical realism

*The artist Didier William carves out memories from his youth growing up in an immigrant household – albeit not exactly as they happened.*

BY [MARGARITA LILA ROSA](#) | 6.5.23

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Didier William's newest series of wood-panel works is told from the perspective of his childhood self, with all the wonder, curiosity and magic that comes with being a kid. Some of the works speak to the experiences of his parents, as they raised young Didier in Miami, Florida. While, for some, Miami can feel like a sort of second Haiti, for Didier and his family, being in the United States brought instability and a constant sense of othering.

Recently, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Miami (MOCA) presented a survey of Didier's earlier works — the artist's largest solo presentation yet. Now, just a few months later, he is presenting a solo exhibition of new works at the James Fuentes Gallery space in Los Angeles, titled *Things Like This Don't Happen Here* — the 'here' a reference to Miami. "This new world was weird and spectacular and strange, partly because we weren't from here," Didier said. "Because we didn't have the benefit of ground underneath us, the stakes felt that much higher."

We sat down with Didier to talk about the show, the childhood memories that inspired the work and the ancestral connections he hopes to tap into on his journey of experiencing the world as a new parent.



"My Father's Nightmares: My Sleepwalking Cousins," 2023

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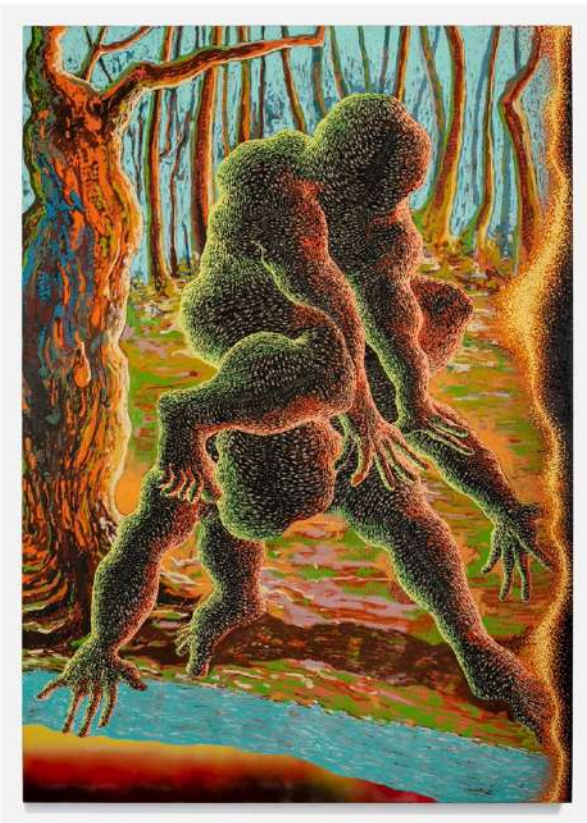
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## **How does it feel to have a solo at a gallery space again, after your career-defining show at MOCA?**

It feels phenomenal to be here. This is the most personal work that I've made in a long time, and it's also the most mythological work that I've made in a long time. The MOCA show was an encapsulated survey of my earlier career. It feels really great to come out of that show with a new direction and introduce that new direction in a whole new space. It all feels pretty euphoric, honestly.



"Sherman: The Other Side of the Mirror is Home," 2002

## **You have so many caves and subterranean elements in this show. How do these elements play in how you think about memories and space?**

Space often provides groundedness and stability. When thinking about how these moments live in my memory, I wanted to strip any stable ground away from them, because that's how we lived these events. That's how we experienced them: with the kind of urgency that didn't give us the security of being from the area or being native-born citizens — an urgency that quite literally stripped the ground from underneath us. So, I like to think: how can I make images in the absence of gravity? What are the spatial conditions where we can suspend gravity? For me, that happens underwater and in air. So, in my work, you'll see people suspended and in air, or underwater. They're intentionally upended.

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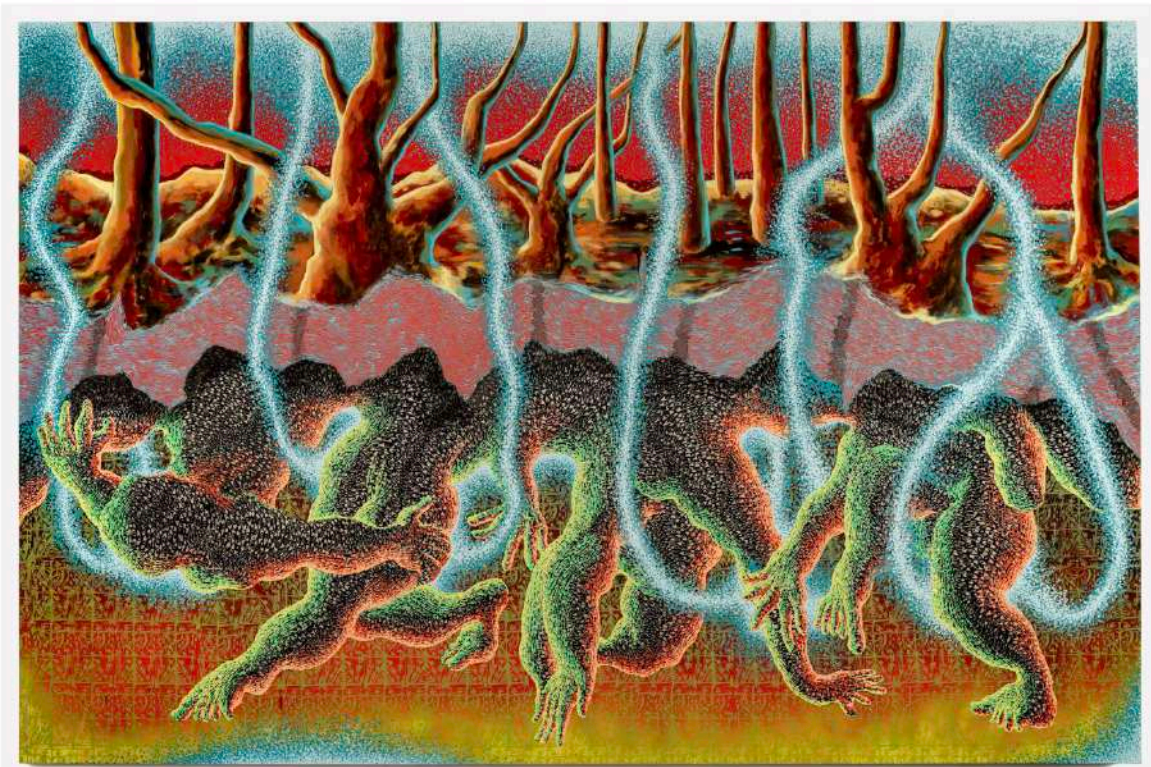
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**I love the piece in the show “Cursed Grounds” because it represents a compositional style you work with a lot, which is dividing the space between a subterranean world and the world above ground.**

This goes back to the idea of multiple histories happening simultaneously. My partner and I are new parents, and this landscape was inspired by Lorimer Park, where we would take our daughter during COVID. When we went there, we would marvel at these beautiful, huge trees spread across the park. As I was coming back to this part of my practise about subterranean life, I wanted to think about these energetic waves as the connective tissue between us, the heavens and the ancestors. These energetic waves stitch and seam the terrestrial and ancestral worlds together.



"Cursed Grounds: They'll Come for Us. They'll Come from the Sky," 2022

**You seem to strip away gender presentations. Have your figures always been this amorphous and anonymous?**

Yes, I intentionally strip them of any kind of gender formations. As a queer person, I want to think about how gender shows up in the work beyond sexuality, beyond body-to-body coupling. I want to think about how gender shows up in the family or how gender — or the absence thereof — can manipulate a space. There is a kind of multiplicity that undergirds everything about queerness that, for me, has to go well beyond the body.

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In the beginning, I wanted to cloak my figures in this armour of eyes. Actually, in the newer works that I am working on right now in the studio, they are beginning to shed this skin, and are beginning to “talk back” to the eyes. But rather than these figures being amorphous, I want to see them as intentionally cloaked in this shield of armour. The cloak is “anonymity” to the extent that it can be radical liberation. If you immigrate to this country speaking a language other than English, for example, you have this sort of superpower. Just as others can render you invisible, you can render yourself invisible and move through spaces with a kind of subversive energy.

**There is so much power in your work, “I Wanted Her to Kill Him, I Know Why She Didn’t”. Can you tell me about the memories that brought about this piece?**

When I was around eleven, my mom used to work at this Haitian restaurant in Miami and her boss was terribly abusive. There were times that he tried to sexually assault my mom. One time, my father and I went to pick her up late at night and she got into the car crying. She started telling my father how nasty this man was, and I remember being in the back seat thinking: my dad is this big strong man, and my mom is the strongest person I know. How can they let this happen to her? Why doesn’t my mother just eradicate him? Why doesn’t my father just kill this man? Why don’t they just get rid of him? My eleven-year-old brain tried to find the simplest solution. And I wanted to go back to that moment and think about, if I could have actualised it then, what would it have looked like?



"I Wanted Her to Kill Him, I Know Why She Didn't," 2023

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## Would you describe your work as surrealist?

I describe it as magical realist. The mystical realm is part of our ancestry, especially within Haitian Vodou and worship rituals. I can't separate Vodou from how we identify as Haitians and how I — coming from the diaspora — conceptualise it, having left Haiti when I was six years old. As I am grappling with my own personal anecdotal history and those histories that have been passed down orally, you can't not include mysticism, mythology, Vodou and magical realism. That language has to be part of how I tell the immigrant story. The oral archive, for me, is just as important as the supposedly "stable" historical archive. The oral archive is organic, it is living and it is contained in the bodies of me, my siblings and our ancestors. That archive is just as important to me. I want to think about, when lightning comes from the sky, how does that remap an event as it lives in my memory? Now, that's a different kind of realism.



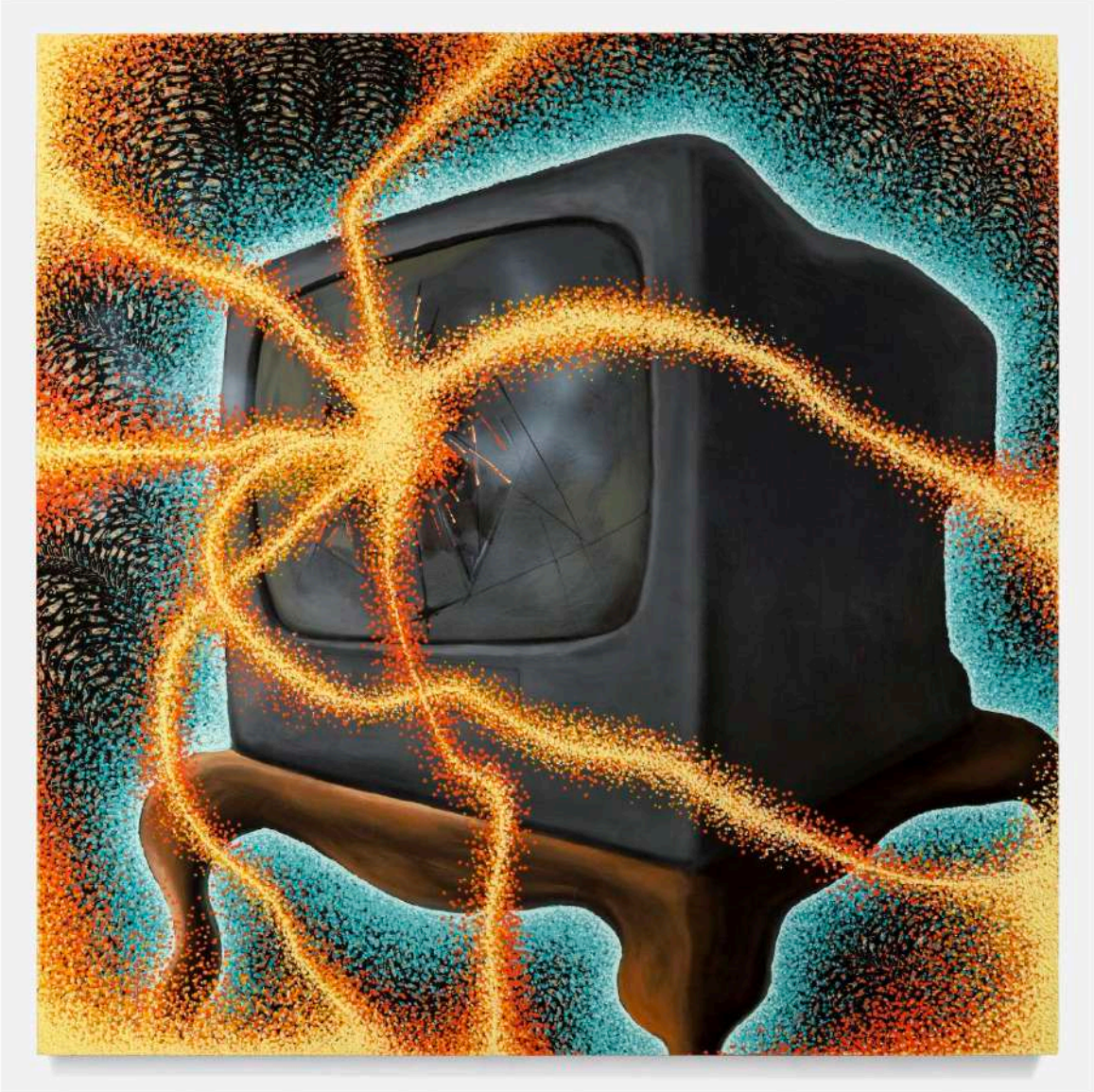
"Viande (Meat)," 2022

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"TV Tyranny," 2023

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"Plonje (Dive)," 2023



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"Dezabiye: a Burning Glare Withheld," 2023

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"Free Fall," 2023

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# ARTFORUM

Patel, Alpesh Kantilal, "Didier William," *Artforum*, April 2023



Didier William, *Ma Tante Toya (My Auntie Toya)*, 2017, ink, collage, and wood carving on panel, 64 × 50".

**Didier William**

MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART, NORTH MIAMI

The title of Didier William's impressive solo exhibition here, "*Nou Kite Tout Sa Dèyè*," is Kreyòl, or Haitian Creole, for "We Have Left That All Behind"—fitting, as the artist's family relocated to North Miami from Haiti during the late 1980s. While William's genealogy and the name of the show evoke specific geographic locations, the "where" and "when" examined in the thirty-nine works on display—mixed-media paintings on wood panels, prints, artist books, and one sculpture—are never straightforward.

*Mosaic Pool, Miami, 2021*, is a case in point: The titular basin, surrounded by orange-brown tiles and brightly colored flora, is not an atypical scene for south Florida. However, the lush foliage could also be reminiscent of the Caribbean landscape William's family left behind. From afar, the dynamic and elaborately patterned forms emerging from the pool read as frolicking, miasmic bodies wearing bathing suits in bright green, orange, and blue. Indeed, the work was inspired by the artist's recent stay in one of Miami's high-rise luxury buildings, where he and his brothers had rented a room. Yet a text from William hung next to the image explains that he would not have had access to this kind of lavishness as a young person growing up in a working-class immigrant family.

As one gets closer to the picture, one clearly sees that the figures are composed of innumerable disembodied eyes that the artist meticulously and obsessively inscribed into the piece's wooden surface—carving plays a major role in a lot of William's work. The sheer number of irregular and wavy black outlines delineating the eyes elicits a powerfully unsettling feeling. Moreover, the subjects' clothing is rendered over the eyes via colorful hatching, intensifying the painting's overall vertiginous effect. William began incorporating the motif shortly after the 2012 murder of teenager Trayvon Martin, who lived in Sanford, Florida. Perhaps the eyes are meant to shield the bodies from an omnipresent and oppressive white gaze, offering a form of protection that surveils the surveillant.

Also included here are a group of paintings that transform more art-historical works. One powerful example is *Ma Tante Toya (My Aunty Toya), 2017*, which riffs on Jacques-Louis David's 1793 canvas *Death of Marat*. In William's piece, the subject of David's work is replaced by a woman emerging from a bathtub. The vibratory aspect of the image caused by the surfeit of eyes suggests that the enigmatic figure depicted is vividly alive. Her head is impossibly tilted and parallel to her outstretched arm, which holds a machete. Used in sugarcane farming, the massive blade is also a potent signifier of Haiti's eventual disentanglement from French colonial rule (under France, the nation was known as Saint-Dom-ingue). William's intent is to subversively supplant the revolutionary figure of Marat with one that references the world's only successful slave revolt.

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One gallery in the show, dimly lit, is covered with custom-made textured wallpaper printed with countless eyes. However, their sclerae are a slightly different shade of black than their outlines, which makes them largely invisible. Once again, this type of camouflaging further underscores the artist's interest in anti-legibility, or a kind of Glissantian opacity.

It is worth noting that William is queer, but his art is closer in spirit to the word's use as a verb rather than a noun. The artist's works destabilize, rather than reinforce, a singular identity and function in the interstices between race, sexuality, and nationality as both objects of fantastical narrative and documents of Black life.

— *Alpesh Kantilal Patel*

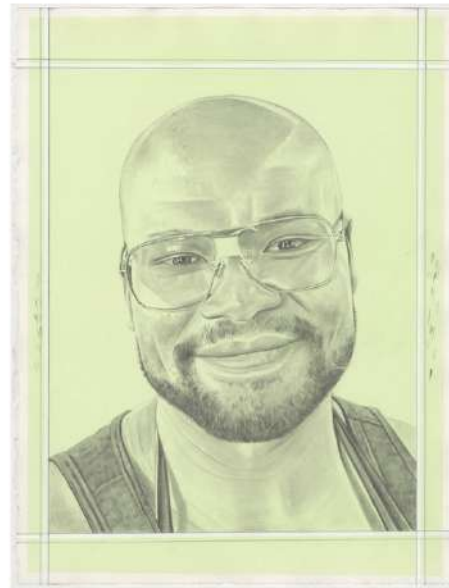
# BROOKLYN RAIL

“Didier William with Charles M. Schultz,” *The Brooklyn Rail*, February 2023

Art | In Conversation

## Didier William with Charles M. Schultz

“I wanted a discrete object to do the temporal work of reading a body in space. And I trusted that painting could do that work.”



Portrait of Didier William, pencil on paper by Phong H. Bui.

In Miami, the largest gathering of Didier William’s work yet to be assembled took place. Years of conversations and studio visits with Dr. Erica Moiah James led to a selection of paintings and prints that convey a passage of artistic evolution. The passage is concerned with the figure. Twenty years ago William had been exploring abstract compositions until the murder of Trayvon Martin compelled a new direction. This exhibition begins at that moment and concludes at its chronological counterpart: the birth of a child and the formation of a family.

The conversation that follows took place on the Rail’s *New Social Environment*. Didier William dialed in from his studio in Philadelphia. It was midday and his interlocutor was Charles Schultz, the Rail’s managing editor. In the hour that followed William and Schultz presented images of the artist’s exhibition as they discussed aspects of his working process, the connection between his life and the imagery that occurs on his surfaces, and how a sense of loss can be an important part of representation.

ON VIEW

Moca North Miami

Didier William: *Nou Kite*

*Tout Sa Dèyè*

November 2, 2022–April 16, 2023

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**Charles M. Schultz (Rail):** Your exhibition is titled *Nou Kite Tout Sa Dèyè*, which means “We’ve left that all behind.” Would you tell me about that phrase?

**Didier William:** The title came about in several meetings with the curator, Dr. Erica Moiah James, who is based in Miami. We had several lead up meetings to talk about the work, but we’d have longer, more personal conversations too, about my family, about our immigration story, about life in Miami, and she would often ask what my parents thought of my work. What kind of input did my parents give me? Because I’m making work that references anecdotes from Haiti, from our early years in the United States. And oftentimes, when I asked them about back home—our house back home, the people back home, all that kind of stuff—they would often say “Nou Kite Tout Sa Dèyè,” or in English, “We left all that behind,” “Forget about it.” “We’re here now.”

I think in many ways they were sort of shielding themselves from the trauma that was embedded in those narratives, and maybe in their minds they were inadvertently shielding me from it too. So there was always this wall of memory or this wall of distance that I felt existed for them. We moved to Miami when I was six years old, so most of what I know about Haiti is pulled from them and my brothers.

I think for both Dr. James and me there was a degree of irony to the title because as many of us who are from other countries know, you can’t in fact leave that stuff behind. It stays with you. It’s in your corporeal reality. It’s in your skin. It’s in your body. It’s in the material around you. I mean, our house was full of artifacts and textiles and things that my mom brought with her from Haiti. Each of those things contain one of these narratives.

**Rail:** Dr. James is from the Bahamas. Is that right?

**William:** Yes, she was the Director of the National Gallery in the Bahamas and she taught art history at Yale for a bit. Now she is a professor at University of Miami. When the opportunity for the show came about, MOCA was working primarily with guest curators. Chana Sheldon, the museum’s executive director, and I immediately thought of Dr. James.

**Rail:** In the process of working with Dr. James, what surprised you? What insight did she provide into your work that you didn’t see?



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**William:** I mean, she's a phenomenal reader and thinker of images. She was able to take a broad scope—sort of a bird's eye view—of my practice, and connect dots that I wasn't thinking about. There's one painting in the show, *I Remember When I Was a Little Girl* (2011), that I made at the Marie Walsh Sharpe Art Foundation residency—now the Sharpe-Walentas Studio Program. It was one of the first paintings I made where I was returning to the figure. Initially I didn't think it would be part of the show. But Dr. James did an amazing job of kind of zooming back and saying, "Hey, wait a minute. A lot of the things we're talking about here, the checkpoint for that happened with this painting."



Didier William, *I Remember When I Was a Little Girl*, 2015. Acrylic, oil, wood stain on panel, 60 x 48 inches.  
Courtesy the artist.

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**Rail:** It's the earliest painting in the exhibition, is that correct? And the only non-representational work?

**William:** It's the earliest painting in the show and the only work that doesn't have any wood carving. It was the first painting to go back to the figure. There's this kind of inverted phallus, this inverted sexualized form—it was one of the first times I started to think about how gender and sex will be re-performed now that I'm returning to the figure. The way I was conceptualizing queerness in the work, not necessarily even having the language of queerness at the time. It's positioned immediately to the left when you walk into the exhibition before you enter the more sort of anecdotal, metaphorical, mythological paintings.

**Rail:** So it's one of the first works the viewer sees when they enter the exhibition space.

**William:** Yeah, it's funny because looking at it now, I can see that the bottom of this painting is what my work looked like, say from 2009 to 2011: mostly non-representational, quite abstract. I had just left graduate school and I wanted a break from the body; I wanted a break from anatomy; I wanted a break from figure. I wanted to see what the material could do, setting up certain conditions of friction, and using gravity to sort of engage those conditions. I was looking at Frankenthaler and Norman Lewis and a lot of abstract expressionist painting.

But then something drove me back to the body. It coincided with the beginning of state-sanctioned violence on Black and brown people being captured on film. Namely Trayvon Martin, who was murdered not that far away from Miami, in Sanford, Florida, where I grew up. I started to rethink how I was conceptualizing figuration, how I was conceptualizing the body. How I was conceptualizing representation and what risks were involved in that—what was at stake in the process, both for me and for the viewer. I started asking myself different questions: How do I slow it down even further from just rote representation? How do I completely halt the process? How do I halt the circuitry of looking between a viewer and a body on a painting? I wasn't interested in switching to video or anything. I wanted a discrete object to do the temporal work of reading a body in space. And I trusted that painting could do that work.

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One day not too long afterwards I made the painting, *His Life Depends On Spotted Lies* (2015), which was the first time I started carving anything. It's a much smaller piece. It's 20 by 16 inches—a very small piece. There was a kind of portrait figure, and a green and blue tapestry in the back. The figure itself was stained, and then I think out of frustration or boredom or just the curious desire to see something else in the picture, I started carving onto the surface. Instead of painting the eyes where they would normally go, I carved two eyes onto the surface of the panel. Because my MFA was in painting and printmaking I had all these wood carving materials at my disposal. I was working on this panel, and I just kept carving into it. I carved from the top of the head to the base of the neck. And at the end of that experience, I realized that I hadn't just removed something, I had added something to the panel. I thought I wasn't engaged in this reductive process, but in effect, taking something away actually added something to the panel that wasn't previously there. And I didn't know how to name it. I didn't know what it was. I didn't know anything about it. I just knew that it was deeply, physically satisfying. Something happened that I've sort of been in that curious zone with carving ever since, except now it's ballooned into my entire studio practice.

[*Laughter*]

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Didier William, *His Life Depends on Spotted Lies*, 2015. Wood stain, pastel, wood carving on panel, 20 x 16 inches. Courtesy the artist.

**Rail:** A lot of your work is quite large. How did your experience of gouging into the panels change as you began to scale up your efforts?

**William:** In the beginning I was doing it manually, which as you can imagine was torture on my wrist. Actually, I made the first one on my bed in my Brooklyn apartment, and then I had to dust off all the sawdust so that I wouldn't get stabbed by it when I went to sleep. [Laughter] Subsequently, I started to wonder what kinds of tools I could use to dig deeper and further into the surface of the wood. I worked with a fabricator who is based in New York and he suggested birch because it is a soft material. So I started carving into birch, and then started thinking about the scale and size of the bodies, and how I could replicate the drawings that I was beginning with. Everything begins with drawing.

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I have hundreds and hundreds of drawings that don't ever make it to the paintings. The drawings that I'm excited about and want to invest more into—I transfer them onto the surface of the panel. They then get stained with dark, almost black ink. Once that is dry, I draw other figures onto the panel. And then they get carved with a rotary tool. So it sounds like a dentist's office in my studio pretty much all day. [*Laughter*]

In the beginning, the figures were much smaller and more intimate. But I wanted them to be larger than life, to be just beyond life-scale, to stand up outside of the panel as if they were eight or nine feet tall. And I've 's something sort of autobiographical about the bodies—I'm a pretty big guy, and I always have been. I've always been aware of how the measurements of the conventional world are designed with a particular body in mind. When you are outside of that particular measurement scale, you're hyper aware of it. How could I turn that into a super-strength rather than something that was diminishing?

So my figures are always in the space of titans, sort of a dream space—I don't even think about them as human. I don't think of them as people. I think of them as apparitions or titans, something aspirational, which allows me to project further into the mythology of these narratives.

**Rail:** Before we go too much further into your process and history, I want to come back to 's a big show; there's more than forty paintings in two rooms. One room is set up as an anti-chamber; the walls are dark. And then there's a secondary room that is large and bright. There are three major new paintings in the smaller room, and a selection of your prints. Why these three paintings? Why this selection of prints?

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Installation view, *Didier William: Nou Kite Tout Sa Dèyè*, November 2nd, 2022-April 16, 2023, at the Museum of Contemporary Art, North Miami (MOCA). Courtesy of The Museum of Contemporary Art. Photo: Michael Lopez.

**William:** Initially we didn't think about including prints. But as of about the last maybe three, four years, the discrete print has started to become a bigger part of my practice—right around when Dr. James and I started having our conversations. As she started to discover some of these prints, she suggested we include a selection in the exhibition. That selection occupies one wall, and then facing those prints are three paintings: two are of these houses—*83rd St* and *125th St* (both 2022)—that are sort of precariously and buoyantly nestled within this mass of bodies, and the third, titled *Just Us Three* (2021), is figurative. That was a difficult painting because it is about my husband and I becoming parents. I knew I wanted to make a painting about that experience but I could have never anticipated that our journey would align almost exactly with a global pandemic.

I remember I sat back in my studio and thought, “What do I do? How do I make? How do I have this 's gonna play out.” I wanted to make a piece that highlighted the fact that for about a year it was just the three of us: myself, my husband, and our daughter. We couldn't introduce our friends to our baby, we couldn't introduce our family to our baby. It felt like we were sitting on this sort of precarious cliff, not knowing what was behind us, and not knowing what was ahead of us, but needing to just sort of hold on to one another as best as we could. That's how the painting came about.

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Didier William, *Just Us Three*, 2021. Acrylic, oil, wood carving on panel, 104 x 68 inches. Courtesy James Fuentes Gallery.

**Rail:** I love how the body language is not what one would expect. There's no cradle. I like the way the small figure is crawling on the two larger figures, which are interlocked in a way that communicates togetherness, even tenderness, despite the fact that they're not doing typical things like hugging or holding hands or anything like that. How did you decide on this body language?

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**William:** Well, I wanted it awkward. [*Laughter*]. Anybody who has had a child can attest to this awkwardness. It was our first baby—we now have two kids—and there was a lot of awkwardness going from a couple to being a family of three. The entire landscape of our home changed, and our relationships to each other did too. I was trying to figure out how to handle this new unit of three and I didn't want sentimentality to take over the painting. I wanted the bodies' sort of Tetris-like attempt to interlock with one another to be the fulcrum of the painting.

**Rail:** Thanks Didier, that's beautiful. How about the two paintings of houses, *83rd St.* and *125 St.*? I noticed that the shape enveloping the houses along the bottom is similar to the shapes in the prints on the wall nearby, titled *Cursed Grounds: Blessed Bones* (2022). What's the relationship or connection here?

**William:** The two works aren't connected, but I have been thinking a lot about this idea of looking at two spaces at once, looking at multiple spaces at once—so the picture plane straddles an area above some kind of cross section of Earth and an area below. That has become this whole series of works called "Cursed Grounds." The one in the exhibition, *Cursed Grounds: Blessed Bones*, is a four-plate copper etching that was printed in collaboration with Harlan & Weaver press in New York. Felix Harlan, master printer, did a phenomenal job with that print. And then the others have been paintings that also follow this kind of stratified earth composition where you're looking at an area above and you're looking at an area that's at eye level, and you're looking at an area below. And the area below makes up these conglomerations of bodies, these ancestors, for lack of a better word. And then the area above, in some cases, is a landscape.



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Didier William, *Cursed Grounds: Blessed Bones*, 2022. Multiplate color intaglio. 44 x 35 5/8 inches., Courtesy James Fuentes Gallery.

In that particular print it's this park that's close to our house, a little park that we like to take my daughter to, and it has these really beautiful trees that she loves to run around in. I took a picture of it, drew those trees out, and then in print—I think it's a four or five color spit bite that makes up those trees. At the bottom of the piece the eye pattern is printed in a flat bite. And then there's another pattern underneath it, which you can see a little bit in yellow, like a yellowy-green, and that's the Haitian voodoo *Lwa*, Papa Legba, who's the guardian of the underworld. And so you're looking at these two different spaces at the same time that offer two completely different realities. And one thing to mention in the print, I really wanted the bodies to feel like they were made out of chains or something. Once we printed that proof and I saw the beautiful capacity of intaglio. But next to the trees it felt really rigid and stiff, and I loved that. If it could be auditory, I wanted it to sound like chains rattling—completely different from the way that conglomeration of bodies happens in the paintings.

The two paintings that you were mentioning depict the first two houses that my family lived in, in Miami. Those paintings came about not necessarily suddenly, but once I knew the show was going to happen, and I knew the show was gonna include all of these paintings that were metaphorical and mythological, and me sort of indulging all of these fantastical modes of

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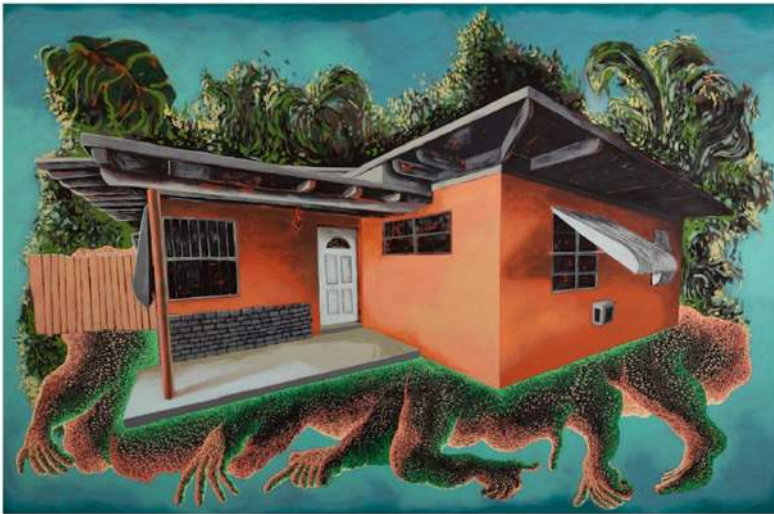
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storytelling, it felt important to bookend the exhibition and frame the literal location where those things took place. Some of the paintings are about events that happened in Miami with me and my brothers, our immigration process, intimate moments that happened to me in Miami, accidents that happened in Miami, traumatic and horrific moments that happened in Miami —the containers for all of those things were these two houses we lived in.

For those two paintings, I wanted to shift the visual language and pull up architectural renderings of those houses and try to remain faithful to those renderings and those measurements, and preserve and respect the integrity of these houses, even though they're sort of nestled in these masses; they're nestled in these spaces, and still subject to that fragile history. I wanted the houses to sort of reign supreme in the exhibition and claim that space right away, and really in some ways, honor those houses because they were the spaces that kept us safe and kept us secure and protected us when we were applying for American citizenship and contained a lot of the documents that kept my family in good standing with the American government. And so when you walk into the exhibition, you see the green house and then you see the orange house, and then in between them on the perpendicular wall is *Just Us Three*.



Didier William, *125th St.*, 2022. Acrylic, ink, and wood carving on panel, 70 x 106 inches. Courtesy James Fuentes Gallery.

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**Rail:** It's a beautiful triangulation of paintings and ideas. It communicates a whole lot about what builds life, what sustains life, what structures enable life. To me, it looks like the two houses, and the natural or ancestral zones they're nestled in, are floating in this amorphous area. Do you read it as floating? Do you read it differently?

**William:** I don't object to floating. I like to think of them as groundless. I've always wanted to remove ground and remove gravity from the paintings, but keep their presence intact. If I could extract gravity from the reality that I'm trying to depict, but keep everything else contained, what kind of liberation could that offer my characters? What kind of freedom could that offer me in terms of presenting these places in a way that was more honest and truthful to what I and my loved ones experienced?

Process-wise, it's always a question for me when I'm building these competitions: how do I make them as groundless as possible? One of my favorite painters is Robert Colescott. In many ways he used a similar strategy where you feel like the entire thing is sort of—like if you tilted the painting this way, it would slide off the table or slide off the ground. I think it added this level of perceptual instability that made Colescott's painting even more politically jarring, and even more powerful. Not just the content, but that the actual infrastructure of the painting—the pegs were being pulled out of it. That's always been 've always envied that, and wanted to replicate it in my work. Others have mentioned it as a kind of a lift, as a kind of a groundlessness, and I love that because it all points to this idea that flight is liberatory. And that's kind of where I want that to sit.

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**Rail:** As you're talking about groundlessness and removing gravity, I'm reminded of the sculpture you made for the show, *Poto Mitan 2* (2022). It's a stunning work. I see bodies in a vertical stack that sort of hangs in the center of the gallery. I know that it connects to ideas of 's a sense of awkwardness as well in the way that you've stacked them. Do you see it similarly? As an escape from gravity and a move towards liberation?

**William:** It hangs from airline wires that you can see a little bit, but it doesn't touch the ground. It hovers maybe eight inches above the floor. So it just kind of floats in the center of the room as you're looking at the rest of the paintings.

When Dr. James and I were talking about the show and I pointed to my interest and previous history in sculpture, I decided to make a new work for the exhibition, the stack of bodies that's about 12 feet tall, and title it "Poto Mitan." In Haitian voodoo the poto mitan is the pole in the center of the room around which ritual and worship takes place. The pole is considered to be the portal or gateway between our world and the world of the gods. Very often you would hang worship objects, or precious objects—things that you love—on the pole. Many times it's made of wood, and sometimes it's even made of a living tree.

For my work, I wanted the pole to still be a portal or a gateway, but I wanted that gateway to be made of bodies, because I think when we're talking about

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narratives of immigration, oftentimes the human unit of measurement is the body. The way in which we gauge our distance between now and something that we call home is either through our bodies or the bodies of the ones that we love. So it made sense for me to take this thing that would normally be an inanimate object, and animate it with the bodies of my characters, so that it felt like the bodies were jumping from the surface of the paintings and right into the middle of the room. And it's right in the center so that when you walk into the exhibition, you sort of have to walk around it in order to see the paintings, and it's always sort of hovering behind you too.

**Rail:** Earlier you were talking about your move from non-representational work to representational work through the tragic death of Trayvon Martin. But it wasn't just bodies that began to appear in your work, but bodies that—as another writer called it—have an “epidermal eye-shield.” So now you've been doing it for, well, a decade. How has the meaning of a body covered with eyes shifted for you? Or maybe it hasn't? What's happened over the last decade?

**William:** Yeah, definitely, but I've only loosely taken stock of all the ways that it has changed. Initially, the startling thing about it, the thing that surprised me, was that it forced me to be super present. That's what I loved about it, but that was also the thing that scared me, because it brought me right to the surface of the work. It was a literal measurement of the amount of time I spent at that surface, about six to eight inches away.

So the reductive process gave way to this experience of complete presence that I wanted to happen for my viewer too. For me, that gets closer to the experience of representation than any kind of illusionistic process. And that moment has evolved over time to become this question of presence that I think is essential when we're talking about representation at large, but specifically the representation of narratives that include Black and brown people. It's a temporal, fragile, vulnerable process that I've always wanted to hold on to and insist that my viewers experience as well.

Over time, that moment has expanded to not just include the bodies in the paintings, but it's now part of the way that the actual architecture in the paintings is built. Now the wall is made up of this map of Haiti. Now the fabric on the bedsheet is made up of these symbols in Haitian voodoo that my mom talked about, but that I never thought about in this way. It's turned into a strategy to think about how everything materializes. I became less interested in the perceptual tricks I can use to make things look more real, and more

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interested in the temporal process of bringing those things to an experiential condition for the viewer. The first time I saw that happening was when I started carving eyes onto the bodies of the figures. Now, it permeates every part of the surface.

**Rail:** It's fascinating to listen to you talk about how you're layering information into the paintings in an increasingly complicated manner. I find one of the challenges to doing that is that your audience doesn't always have access to that information. We come to the work with what we have, we find what we find. And—

**William:** Well, that's an important point, because it highlights the fact that loss is part of representation. Ninety-nine percent of the time loss is very much part of the experience of those who are being represented. And so I like the idea that there is something lost in the process here and contending with that loss is part of what we're talking about when we talk about representation at large, but specifically the representation of Black and brown people whose histories are subject to a tremendous amount of loss. I think wrestling with that condition, both in the process and in the way that work is read and consumed, needs to be centered. That's very important for me.

Sometimes the works are titled in Haitian Creole. Sometimes I've given translations and other times I've asked my gallery not to give translations. And that means some people won't know what a painting is titled, and I'm okay with that because there are other layers of legibility for that person to hook on to and get into the content of the work. Stacking those layers of legibility is really exciting for me, because sometimes it gives way to things I never even imagined.

**Rail:** I couldn't agree with you more about that, but the one thing I would challenge is the condition of loss for the viewer. I mean you need to have once had something to feel its loss. I can't read Haitian Creole, I never could—I don't feel that I lost anything, just that something is outside my understanding, outside my knowledge body. It's like looking at a language I can't read; I can tell it's presenting a message, but I can't access it. So maybe less a feeling of loss and more a sense of opacity. And you were talking earlier about slowing down. This is one of the ways that I think that happens for a viewer. Processing the information takes time.

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**William:** Thanks, I love that point, and I love the Glissantian nod to opacity there. You're right, the speed of it is critical. The slowing down is critical. In person, the layering is obviously much more pronounced than any photograph could capture and it leads to the question of overlap, which brings one to consider the edges. I nerd out on the edges that happen on the surfaces quite a bit. Oftentimes that's one of the ways I judge whether or not a work is finished. It really has less to do with the picture, and more to do with what the surface and the edges are doing to one another. Once that friction reaches a kind of crescendo, that's when I get most excited and think, "Okay, this painting is doing what I wanted it to do."

**Rail:** I want to take a little bit of a side turn. We've talked a lot about the objects, but we haven't talked too much about people in your life. If there were two people that you had to think of who've had a profound impact on your evolution as an artist, who would you name? What stories would you tell me?

**William:** The first one is a no-brainer: my mom. Oftentimes, people ask if there are any other artists in my family, and we don't have any other visual artists in my family, but my mom is a chef's been cooking her entire life. She started at the American Embassy in Haiti when she was thirteen years old. She virtually lived there and grew to run it. That's where she learned how to cook. And then once we moved to the United States, she had her own restaurant with a friend of hers. But the way in which she thinks about food is how I think about painting, and the alchemy that she brings to it. I hung out with her as a kid constantly and saw her taking raw material, and turning it into stuff that smelled and tasted like magic. I experienced that my entire adolescence, and I absorbed it. Now I do the exact same thing but with paint and paper, and wood, and acrylic and oil and pigment. But that alchemy, the first place I witnessed and learned the potential of it was watching my mother in the kitchen.

The other person who comes to mind right away is one of my mentors at graduate school, Rochelle Feinstein. She was the first person to encourage me to think about where the overlap might occur between my paintings and my prints. Now my printmaking practice and my painting practice have become so enmeshed that they're kind of indistinguishable from one another.

**Rail:** Now I'm curious, your beautiful painting of a big bowl of soup, *Soup Joumou* (2020), is that piece in honor of your mother?

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Didier William, *Soup Joumou*, 2020. Acrylic, ink, wood carving on panel, 22 x 32 inches. Courtesy James Fuentes Gallery.

**William:** I mean, it's very much a nod to my mom, for all the reasons I described. I made that painting at a time when I had just started making my own soup joumou. Soup joumou is squash soup, and we Haitians make it on January 1. January 1, in addition to being the beginning of the new year, is Haitian Independence Day. And this was a culinary masterpiece that was forbidden to the enslaved West Africans in Haiti. Promptly upon independence it became the national dish, and Dessalines wanted it served and consumed on January 1 to commemorate this thing that was once forbidden to us now being something we enjoy and consume as rightfully ours. And so to this day, on January 1, if you're Haitian, you need to either make it yourself or go find a Haitian restaurant, go to an aunt's house or an uncle's house and find it. When we had kids, my mom said, "Well, now you have your own kids, so you need to make your own soup." And so I made it and snapped a picture of it and sent it to her. And she asked me how it tasted and I said it tastes pretty good, but not like yours. But I liked the picture. And so I printed a picture out, and brought it with me to the studio and made a painting out of it.

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## Contributor

**Charles Schultz**

**Charles M. Schultz** is Managing Editor of the *Brooklyn Rail*.



# FRIEZE

Uszerowicz, Monica, "Shows to See in the US this January," *Frieze*, January 13, 2023

## Shows to See in the US this January

From a survey of Deana Lawson to an international exhibition foregrounding US imperialism since 1945, here are the top shows to see across the US

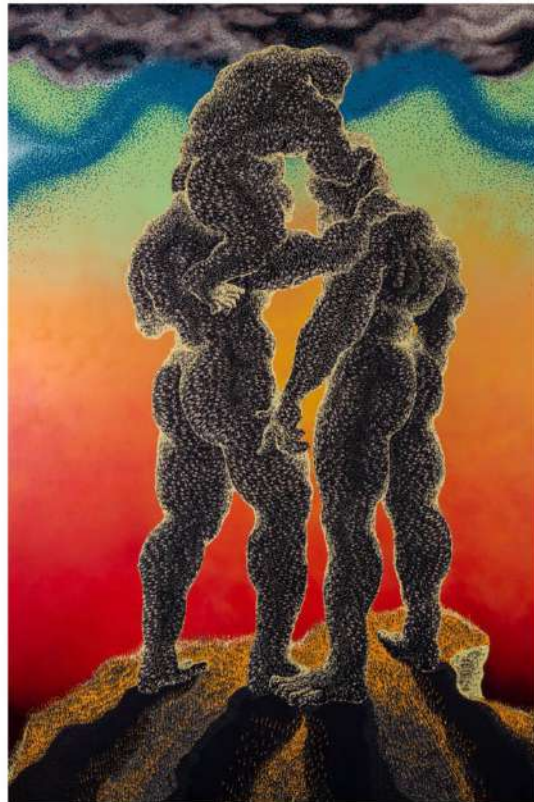


BY FRIEZE IN EXHIBITION REVIEWS, US REVIEWS | 13 JAN 23

### Didier William

MOCA North Miami

November 2, 2022 – April 16, 2023



Didier William, *Just Us Three*, 2021, acrylic, oil, wood carving on panel, 2.6 × 1.7 m. Courtesy: the artist and MOCA North Miami, photograph: Constance Mensh

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Both the title and setting of Didier William's exhibition are aptly retrospective, the former translating to 'We've left that all behind' in Haitian Creole. The artist himself was raised in North Miami. Curated by Erica Moiah James, the exhibition features new paintings among the more than forty mixed media pieces, some of which refer with great sensitivity to William's personal experiences in the last few years. William and his husband became parents during the early days of the COVID-19 lockdown; in *Just Us Three* (2021), the figures gaze over a precipice and hold each other, covered in the artist's signature pattern of eyes, as if they were looking at us, too. MOCA has also partnered with producer and director Marlon Johnson to produce a documentary on William, which is forthcoming. Before leaving MOCA, see Chire Regans a.k.a. VantaBlack's 'To What Lengths', for which the artist has decorated the museum plaza's palm trees with braids, beads and flowers. — *Monica Uszerowicz*

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## The New York Times

Sheets, Hilarie M., "Art to See in South Florida this Winter," *The New York Times*, November 30, 2022

### Art to See in South Florida This Winter

Visitors will find a rich variety of works at museums, satellite fairs and art spaces.



"Gwo Madame" (2020) by Dider William is in his retrospective at MOCA North Miami. Braithe Foundation Collection

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Alongside [Art Basel](#), now celebrating its 20th anniversary in Miami Beach, the South Florida network of museums, private collections, art spaces and satellite fairs has proliferated and matured in tandem. These institutions always serve up their shiniest offerings for the annual movable feast, and high-speed train service on the [Brightline](#) now makes it all the easier to sample shows as far north as West Palm Beach. Here's a selection from the buffet.

## MOCA North Miami

Embedded in a largely immigrant community and a longtime anchor for contemporary art backed by hefty scholarship, MOCA North Miami now is giving its spotlight to an artist from the museum's own backyard. [Didier William](#), born in Haiti and raised in North Miami, currently has his largest retrospective to date on view with surreal paintings, prints and sculptures that explore his coming-of-age as a Black, queer immigrant. Mr. William's dreamy and disorienting landscapes are populated with figures tattooed entirely with eyes, like a protective and watchful bark, a motif that he began exploring after the 2012 killing of Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Fla.

# ARTnews

Aton, Francesca, "Didier William Is Using His Art to Offer Black, Queer Immigrants Hope," *ARTnews*,  
November 29, 2022

## 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.

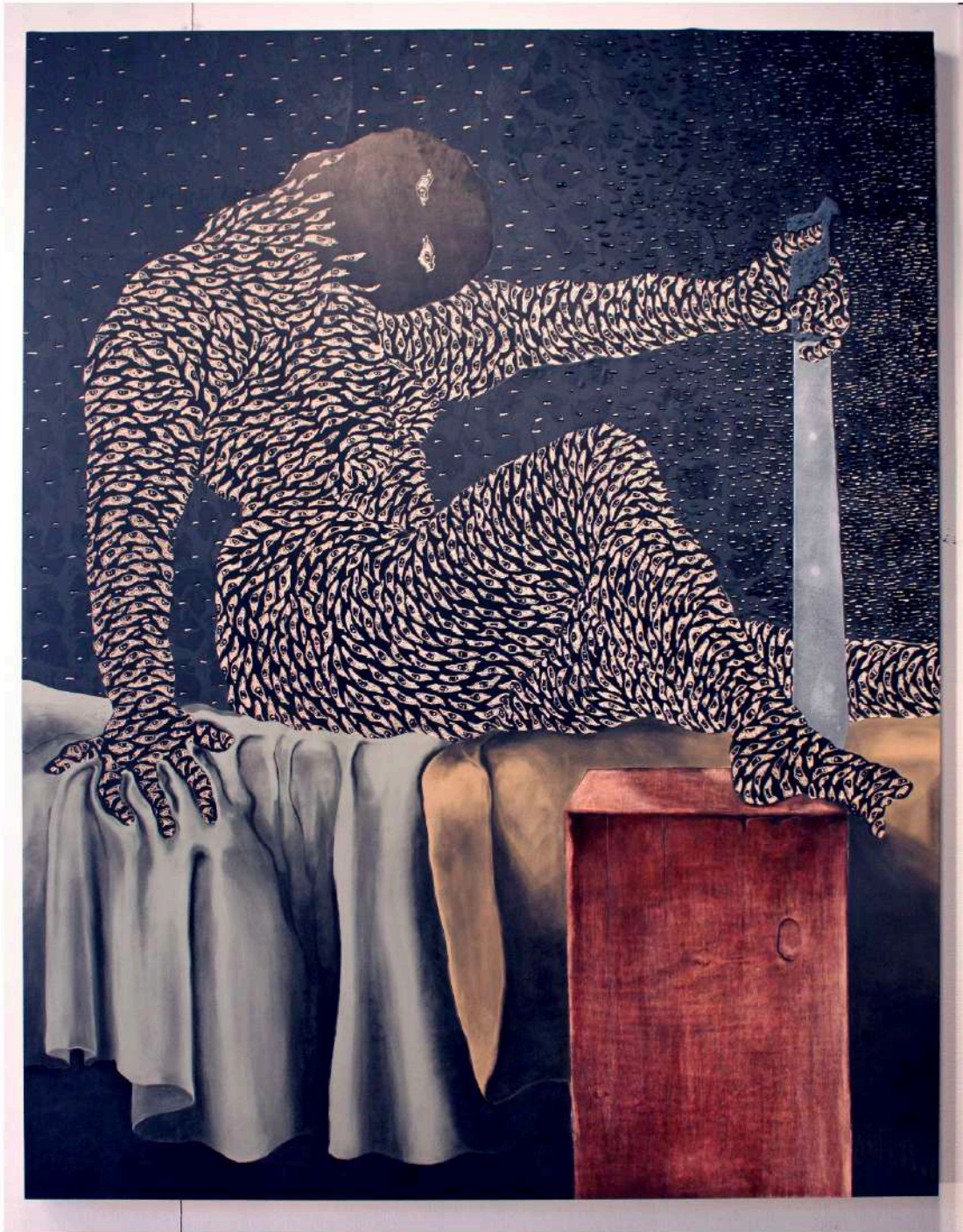
Ultimately, “everything is about life,” James says. “When people are struggling to stay above water, they're *just* above the surface.”

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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."

# artnet news

“The Class of 2022: Meet 6 Fast-Rising Artists Having Star Turns at This Year’s Art Basel Miami Beach,” *Artnet News*, November 29, 2022

## Art Fairs

### The Class of 2022: Meet 6 Fast-Rising Artists Having Star Turns at This Year’s Art Basel Miami Beach

From an Ivorian-American who works with paper towels to a post-internet artist getting a posthumous spotlight, here's who to watch.

**Artnet News**, November 29, 2022



Didier William. Photo by Ryan Collerd, courtesy of the Pew Center for Arts and Heritage

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Ready or not, Art Basel Miami Beach is upon us and the 20th anniversary edition of the fair in the U.S. promises to be filled with star-studded events, as well as plenty of ascendent talent to scout.

At this year's Miami art week, there are plenty of artists who deserve your attention, but we narrowed it down to six upstarts whose careers we believe are primed to reach new heights. So whether you're in the throes of JOMO or already starting to feel the FOMO for Art Basel, here's a primer on the work you definitely can't miss out on.

## **Didier William (b. 1983)**



Didier William, *Mosaic Pool, Miami* (2021). Courtesy of the collection of Reginald and Aliya Browne.

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**Who:** Born in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, and raised in Miami, Didier William got his BFA at the Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore, followed by an MFA at the Yale School of Art in New Haven, Connecticut. His mixed media paintings feature a dizzying profusion of tiny dots and other markings. The artist layers this acrylic paint over dark-skinned figures, who, upon closer inspection, are made up of relief carvings on wood panel of hundreds upon hundreds of eyes.

**Based in:** Philadelphia

**Notable Resume Lines:** William's impressive exhibition history includes a solo show at the Figge Museum Art Museum in Davenport, Iowa, as well as group outings at institutions including the Bronx Museum, the Museum of Latin American Art, and the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art. He has also been an artist-in-residence at the Sharpe-Walentas Studio in Brooklyn, and received the Rosenthal Family Foundation Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, a Joan Mitchell Foundation grant, and a Pew Fellowship from the Pew Center for Arts and Heritage in Philadelphia.

**Where to See It:** The artist's largest solo show to date, "Didier William: Nou Kite Tout Sa Dèyè," is on view through April 16 at the Museum of Contemporary Art, North Miami. At Art Basel Miami Beach, William's work will appear alongside of that of Geoffrey Holder, Juanita McNeely, and Oscar yi Hou at the booth of James Fuentes, who represents the artist in New York. (In Los Angeles, William shows with M and B Gallery.)

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**What to Look Out for:** William makes work that sits at the boundary of abstraction and figuration, delving into Afro-Caribbean history to retell stories of the Black diaspora through a potent mix of myth and memory. A common motif is the mango leaf, in a nod to Haiti's native tropical fruits. The MOCA North Miami show will feature 40 paintings as well as William's first monumental sculpture, a 12-foot-tall wooden form inspired by columns used in traditional Haitian religious rituals.

**Prices:** At the fair, William's work will top out at \$120,000.

**Fun Fact:** In addition to his thriving art career, William is also an educator. He is currently an assistant professor of expanded print at the Mason Gross School of the Arts at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey. Previous posts include stints at the Yale School of Art, Poughkeepsie's Vassar College, the University of Pennsylvania, SUNY Purchase, and Columbia University in New York.

**Up Next:** William is featured in the group show "Forecast Form: Art in the Caribbean Diaspora, 1990s–Today," which is at the MCA Chicago through April 23, 2023, and will travel to the ICA Boston from October 5, 2023, to February 24, 2024. He'll also inaugurate Fuentes's new Los Angeles gallery next year.

—Sarah Cascone



# SURFACE

Waddoups, Ryan, “Didier William Imagines the Complexities, Fears, and Joys of Parenthood,” *Surface Magazine*, November 18, 2022

## ARTIST STATEMENT

# Didier William Imagines the Complexities, Fears, and Joys of Parenthood

Depicting a family overlooking a cliff as electricity surges through the sky, one of the Haitian artist’s most personal canvases yet reveals the dual anxiety and optimism felt after welcoming a child during a period of uncertainty.

BY RYAN WADDOUPS

November 18, 2022

*Here, we ask an artist to frame the essential details behind one of their latest works.*

**Bio:** Didier William, 39, Philadelphia ([@dueyart](#))

**Title of work:** *Just Us Three* (2021).

**Where to see it:** “[Nou Kite Tout Sa Dèyè](#)” at the Museum of Contemporary Art North Miami (770 NE 125th St, North Miami, FL) until April 16, 2023.

**Three words to describe it:** New parent life.

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**What was on your mind at the time:** This painting takes a bit of segue from the other works. My husband and I became parents almost exactly in line with the pandemic. The date marked as a kind of national shutdown was March 13. Our daughter was born on April 22. In many ways, pandemic life and new parenthood have been wholly inseparable from one another. The more I thought about the past year and a half—the isolation, the fear, the anxiety, the joy, the relief, the fatigue, the surprises—I wanted to think generously about how the complexity of that experience might be imaged.

This painting came to mind. It images the three of us standing at the precipice of a cliff. The blue ray of electricity that pulses through the top part of the painting is a new element. (In a different painting titled *Siklon*, which means “Hurricane,” the electricity is a much more present element in more work.) Here, I don’t think of “siklon” as a source of destruction. I think of it as the bodies submitting to uniformity with the natural world. Hurricanes are very common in the Caribbean in particular. They forcefully and aggressively reshape the landscape in a manner that operates independently of our egos. This antagonism is something I’ve always loved about representations of nature in painting.

The painting images two masculine-presenting bodies with a smaller, childlike figure precariously balanced on top of their shoulders. There’s an awkwardness to the child. A delicacy that runs in tandem to the tenderness and tone of the painting. This sweet spot was something we thought a lot about during the first year of the pandemic. The joys of being together and bonding with a baby. But the awkwardness of not being able to share this extension of our love with the rest of our family. The figures stand at the precipice of a cliff, perhaps at the border between two worlds. The fiery unknown abyss ahead of them, or the darkened and otherwise invisible field behind them, of which the viewer is a part.

**An interesting feature that’s not immediately noticeable:** The eyes are carved into the surface of the panel.

**How it reflects your practice as a whole:** Titanic supernatural bodies have become the norm in my practice. Here they are presented with an intimacy that more recently has helped spawn many new narratives in subsequent work.

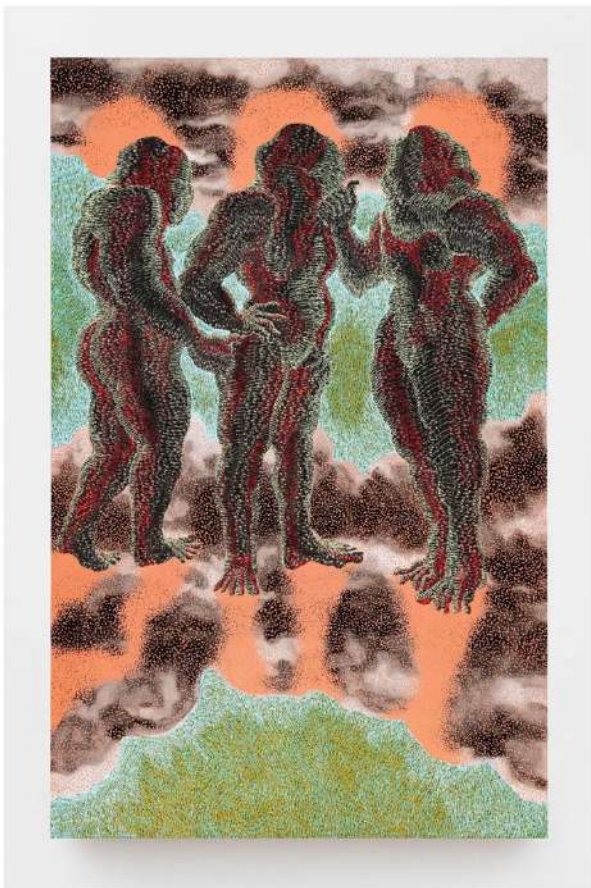
**One song that captures its essence:** None.

**T** The New York Times Style Magazine

Williams, Gisela, "An Artist's Reimagining of Immigrant Identity," *The New York Times Style Magazine*, November 3, 2022

VISIT THIS

## An Artist's Reimagining of Immigrant Identity



Left: Didier William's "Twa Manman, twa kouwon" ("Three Mothers, Three Crowns") (2020). Right: "Just Us Three" (2021). Left: Jason Mandella. Right: Constance Mensh. Courtesy of the artist

**By Gisela Williams**

One of the most noteworthy exhibitions taking place during Miami Art Week is a solo show of work — more than 40 figurative paintings and drawings, as well as a monumental sculpture — from the Philadelphia-based artist Didier William, called “Nou Kite Tout Sa Dèyè” (“We’ve Left That All Behind”) at the Museum of Contemporary Art North Miami. After immigrating to the United States from Haiti with his family as a young child, William grew up near the museum, but he doesn’t call this a homecoming. “Within the context of immigration, I don’t know that a homecoming is possible,” he said. “The idea of home means less to me. It gives me a nervous itch.” But the experience of being a queer Haitian immigrant in Miami has inspired his work, from the architecture of his youth — in one painting, a rendering of his childhood home is buoyed up by several abstract bodies — to more conceptual questions. How, William wondered, could he take the “racist idea of an ‘alien’ and turn it into a superpower. How would it evolve and take shape? That was the simple premise.” That idea is possibly most evident in William’s site-specific totem-like sculpture: a 12-foot male body cut out of wood that stretches from floor to ceiling. “*Didier William: Nou Kite Tout Sa Dèyè*” is on view from Nov. 2 to Apr. 16, 2023, [mocanomi.org](http://mocanomi.org).

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

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## 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, 82 x 70 inches. (Courtesy of the artist and Altman Siegel, San Francisco)

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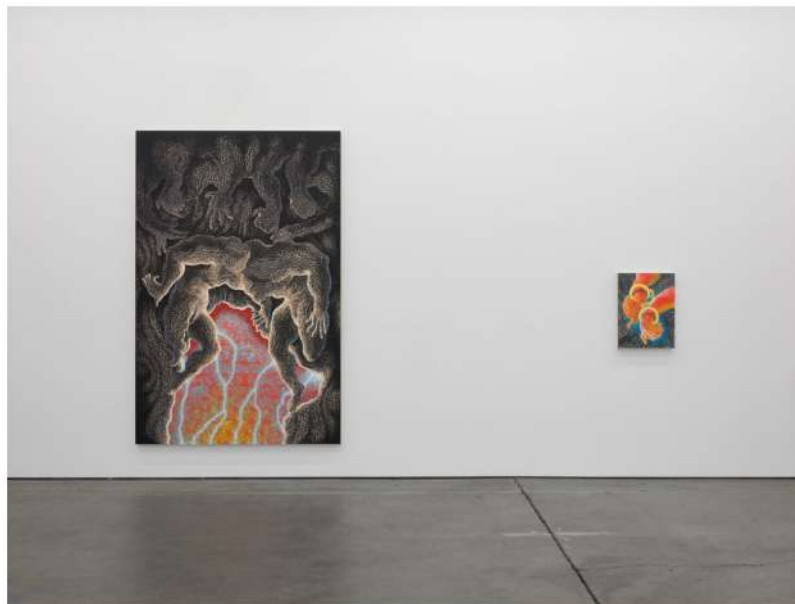
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The artist's paintings involve carved wood, shadowy washes, hand-printed patterns, whiskers of color, and sometimes, additional layers of collage. I'm tempted to describe each layer that (I think) goes into a work on panel, but part of the pleasure 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.

## The New York Times

Graeber, Laurel, "In Didier William's Art, There Is More Than Meets the Eye," *The New York Times*, December 3, 2019

# In Didier William's Art, There Is More Than Meets the Eye

The Haitian-American artist brings his insight and intricate work to Art Basel Miami Beach in what feels like a homecoming.



“Broken Skies: Tè a mi,” 2019, by Didier William translates to “The ground is fertile.” He did the painting partly for his husband, Justin William. Didier William/James Fuentes, New York

**By Laurel Graeber**

Dec. 3, 2019

PHILADELPHIA — You are being watched.

It is difficult to escape that sensation when viewing the work of [Didier William](#), a 36-year-old Haitian-American artist who will be exhibiting for the first time at [Art Basel Miami Beach](#). His three enormous paintings destined for the fair, which are part of a larger series he has tentatively titled “Broken Skies: Vertières,” all depict huge, amorphous bodies whose skin is covered with narrow, piercing eyes.

The [James Fuentes Gallery](#) in New York will present these pieces in the [Nova section](#) against a backdrop that is also dotted with eyes. For Mr. William, this repeating symbol is both a shield from — and a response to — an onlooker’s curious appraisal.

“The eye motif developed around 2014 or 2015 as a way to return some of that gaze back onto the viewer,” he said in an interview in his studio here.

As a gay black immigrant, Mr. William knows what it is like to be stared at. Born in Port-au-Prince, he came as a Creole-speaking 6-year-old to Miami, where he lived with his parents and two older brothers. He spent his youth “closeted,” he said, in a city where “Haitians were relegated to a kind of second-class citizenry.”

At the same time, Miami was also where teachers recognized his talent and steered him toward the [New World School of the Arts](#), a specialized public school that served as a springboard to a degree in painting from the Maryland Institute College of Art and a master of fine arts from Yale. The significance of his debut at Art Basel — where each of his paintings will be priced at \$65,000 — is not lost on him or his dealer, who submitted his work there partly because “of the importance of Miami in shaping his identity and narrative,” said James Fuentes, the gallery owner.

Mr. William’s art, however, is never about just one place or person. “This idea that we don’t exist as singular bodies or singular identities, I think, has always been very much part of my work,” he said. In these paintings, “the overwhelming amount of eyes serves that.”

The figures are important, too. Mr. William, whose career in academia led him to move to Philadelphia three years ago to become chair of the M.F.A. program at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts — a position he recently left — embraced abstraction for a while. But he returned to more figurative work after [the 2012 killing of Trayvon Martin](#), an unarmed black teenager who was shot to death in Sanford, Fla., by George Zimmerman, a neighborhood watch volunteer who was ultimately acquitted of second-degree murder. In Mr. William’s view, those events began with one man’s act of looking — and assuming. The bodies Mr. William has introduced into his work are deliberately unidentifiable, neither male nor female nor even always human.

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**Haitian culture and mythology infuse Mr. William's works that will be on display at Art Basel Miami Beach. Fountainhead Residency**

“The viewer,” he said, “is never really let off the hook in terms of becoming specifically aware of how their gaze is gendering or racializing the figures.”

In other ways, however, Mr. William’s work teems with specific symbols. His paintings at Art Basel are filled with clouds, a new motif that he sees as both “an extraterrestrial space” and a reference to archives of information. The art features luminous colors and dotted patterns, whose staccato effects evoke “Broken Skies,” a title that alludes to the fractures caused by colonialism. The title’s other half, [Vertières](#), is the name of the 1803 battle in which Haiti finally wrested its independence from France, a historical moment that is further reflected in the machete and shovels in the painting “Broken Skies: Nou poko fini,” whose Creole words translate as “We aren’t done yet.”

The shovel, in particular, represents the relationship of Mr. William’s forebears to their land, “one of the main reasons why Haitians were able to defeat the French in the first place,” he said. “For me it’s like this Excalibur.”

Haitian culture and mythology also infuse the other Art Basel works. “Broken Skies: Ouve pot la pou yo” takes its Creole title from the chorus of the song [“Tande” \(“Listen”\)](#) by the Haitian band [Boukan Ginen](#). The phrase means “Open the door for them,” “them” being the loa, or voodoo spirits.

“Broken Skies: Tè a mi,” whose title translates as “The ground is fertile,” is “sort of a painting for my husband,” said Mr. William, who is married to Justin William, a psychotherapist. The two are planning to become parents, and a vibrant, fiery band on the work’s surface is subtly printed with the symbol for the loa’s fierce matriarch.

The art is layered materially, too. Preferring to work on wooden panels rather than stretched canvas, Mr. William carves each unblinking eye directly into the surface, a technique that connects painting with printing. (He is now an [assistant professor of expanded print](#) at the Mason Gross School of the Arts at Rutgers, a post whose odd title indicates the extension of the medium.) His works incorporate collage, oil paint and acrylic as well, making them as multifarious as the Afro-Caribbean diaspora itself.

Seeing this complex painting as a text, Mr. William does not expect everyone to read it the same way. “If my mom, an art historian, a master printer and an oil painter were discussing the work, and they came to four different conclusions about it, I would be O.K. with that,” he said. “One of the joys for me is layering as much information into the paintings as possible, and allowing my viewer to excavate any part of that they wish.”



Those who have bought Mr. William's work include the [Carnegie Museum of Art](#), the Minneapolis Institute of Art, private collectors and a British pop star who did not want his name published — all testimony to what Mr. Fuentes called its “universal appeal.”

It is art with “iconography that everyone can understand,” he said, “even though it has a particular intention and concept.”

For Mr. William, that intention is always to explore the diasporan experience and, he said, “to get closer to a truth that makes sense for black and brown people.” But he takes special pride in bringing this work to Miami in what feels like a homecoming.

“Home is never quite a singular locale,” Mr. William said, “which for me I think is a source of agency rather than a traumatic condition.”

A version of this article appears in print on Dec. 4, 2019, Section S, Page 5 in The New York Times International Edition. [Order Reprints](#) | [Today's Paper](#) | [Subscribe](#)

# The New York Times

Schwendener, Martha, "What to See in New York Art Galleries This Week," *The New York Times*, November 14, 2018

## What to See in New York Art Galleries This Week

John Houck's visual trickery; Svenja Deininger's "Crescendo" paintings; Didier William's eye-catching mixed-media works; and the poet John Ashbery's demure treasures.



Didier William's "M mache toupatou ave I," from 2018, wood carving, collage, ink, acrylic on panel. via James Fuentes LLC

## Didier William

Nov. 14, 2018

Through Nov. 25 at James Fuentes, 55 Delancey Street, Manhattan; 212-577-1201, [jamesfuentes.com](http://jamesfuentes.com). Through Nov. 24 at Anna Zorina Gallery, 533 West 23rd Street, Manhattan; 212-243-2100, [annazorinagallery.com](http://annazorinagallery.com).

Didier William's works are often called paintings because they are rectangular, mounted on the wall and approximate the size of traditional easel paintings. The works in "[Curtains, Stages, and Shadows, Act 1](#)" at James Fuentes and "[Curtains, Stages and Shadows, Act 2](#)" at Anna Zorina, however, are barely painted at all. Instead, Mr. William's method is a clever mix of different two-dimensional mediums: He carves directly into birch panels and arranges his own patterned prints on the surface, using ink and the occasional dash of acrylic paint for emphasis.

This approach, through appearance and illusion, also suits the subject matter of Mr. William, who was born in Haiti. Drawn from the country's history and folklore, as well as his experience of growing up in Miami, his works also probe the idea of having to perform blackness or any kind of identity. Shadowy figures — built from hundreds of tiny eyes that carved into the panels like pixels and return the viewer's gaze — represent family members, Voodoo spirits or leaders in the Haitian Revolution. (Mr. William shifted

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from abstract painting to representing black bodies after Trayvon Martin, an unarmed teenager, was shot to death in 2012.) And machetes suggest violent massacre as well as “tire machet,” the traditional Haitian martial art.

Mr. William’s crafty, enigmatic and sometimes cryptic oeuvre is underscored by his titles, which are in untranslated Haitian Kreyòl, and include proverbs, family expressions and crude street slang. None of theatrical effects would matter, though, if Mr. William’s paintings didn’t grab your attention and hold it, building a sense of tension — even anticipation for Act 3. MARTHA SCHWENDENER

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# Art in America

Hirsch, Faye, "Didier William," *Art in America*, December 1, 2018

## DIDIER WILLIAM

By Faye Hirsch

December 1, 2018 9:00am



The twenty-one mixed-medium paintings in Didier William's two-venue exhibition the most ambitious showing of his work to date were primarily large, more than seven feet long or tall in some cases, and elaborate, suggesting prodigious activity

over the past year, when all of them were made. Their titles were in Haitian Creole and left untranslated, as the thirty-six-year-old Port-au-Prince-born American artist wishes to alert viewers to the linguistic challenges faced by his own parents and other diasporic people and to privilege communication with his compatriots. The exhibition as a whole, though, was given an English title, "Curtains, Stages, and Shadows," announcing the central motifs of the works, most of which portray silhouette-type figures on stages framed by striped components suggesting colorful patterned fabrics.

Rendered on wooden panels, the works combine painted, collaged, and carved elements. The silhouette figures are composed of all-over fields of small eyes incised into the supports and inked in black. Unlike Kara Walker's silhouettes, William's appear to teem with interior life, looking from the inside out, and everywhere. The omnipresent stages comprise areas of exposed panel stained and delineated as planks at raking angles (the off-kilter quality is especially pronounced in *Kolan get manman yo*, where the stage metamorphoses into a keyboard played by an antic figure). Screen-printed strips and patches of paper adhered to the works' surfaces seem to pop slightly forward, while pours of acrylic medium and direct painting atop carved and collaged areas hem in the layers. The pictorial plane is relatively shallow, compressing all the visual and material energy.

In an essay accompanying the show, the cultural historian Jerry Philogene writes of William's childhood in Miami and discusses aspects of Haitian culture to which the works refer: tiny machetes that form a surface pattern in one composition, for example, allude to a vanishing Haitian martial art, and heroines of the Haitian Revolution are the subjects of three small, portrait-like paintings. The artist is clearly toying with stereotypes of menace, undercutting it with a robust sense of humor. We do not know if the tall figure holding a shovel in the handsome *Sa selman m bezwen* is industrious or malevolent, and presumably that indeterminacy is partly the point. William pays homage to contemporaries like Mickalene Thomas

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in *Ki moun ki rele Olympia*, with its reclining odalisque, as well as to Manet's racially problematic *Olympia*; in *Dantor a Anais*, a relatively staid image of a mother and child, one senses an echo of Chris Ofili's *dung Madonna*. And in the screen-printed collage elements there are hints not only of the colorful fabrics of West Africa but also of the works of Pattern and Decoration artists.

The strength of these paintings lies in their vivid and at times unnerving presence. A group of figures hovers in the air in *Nou tout ansanm*, their bodies embedded in a Spanish moss-like mass overhead and their flailing arms and legs casting an ominous shadow on the stage below. One cannot help but think of them as phantoms born of untold violence, but, even as the figures thrash about, the eyes that constitute them give them a kind of power. Not content to settle into the role of the "object" of our gaze—the Other—William's figures stare out at us with eyes like those in a haunted forest. Even unborn, as with the fetus depicted in *Depi nan vant manman m*, they are characterized from without. Yet, wary and hyperconscious, their vigilance protects them.