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Escaping the Galleria : The Ship Channel Photos of Casey Williams

BY SAUNDRA GOLDMAN 7/7/2000

Every day, at 10:00 a.m. and 2:30 p.m., the Sam Houston departs its dock and tours the ship channel of the Port of Houston. The highlights of the trip include a petro-chemical processing plant that looks like a small city, a public grain elevator, and several enormous barges waiting to load and unload cargo. Who would take such a cruise? The most frequent passengers are schoolchildren studying the Port and its industry, and retirees who have the time to visit such unlikely attractions. There is also an occasional businessman or random tourist. And often among them is the artist, Casey Williams, who has been riding the Sam Houston and taking pictures of the Port for fifteen years. Williams brought the boat ride to my attention on a recent visit to his Houston studio, when I asked about the source of the images hanging on his walls.

On a visit with a friend I stopped by Williams' studio, because I wanted to see what he had been doing since he left Austin in 1993. The last time I saw his work, he was making black and white photomontage, combining images of industrial architecture (including ships) and richly decorated interiors in a single frame. The resulting photographs collapsed the two radically different spaces into evocative dreamscapes. I admired this work and was anxious to see it again.

When Williams opened the door, I was taken aback by what looked like large canvasses hanging on the walls – bands of color, bright and glowing, full of texture and signs of wear. They were stunning, but at first also hard to read. It wasn't until he explained that he had taken the pictures from a boat that the red and green striations became legible, as the lower decks of ships and their reflections in the water. On second glance, I could see the sun sparkling on the waves and disappearing, into swirls of blue and white and gray. There was also the intense saturation of color created by the reflection of a red-bottomed boat melting into the water.

"You mean they're not paintings?" I hadn't told my friend that Williams is a photographer. The mistake is easy to make; the allusion to painting is intentional. The images are digitized and printed on a synthetic woven cloth that resembles satin, and mounted on stretcher bars. More significantly, the artist exploits the similarities between the worn surfaces of the boat and the worked surfaces of Abstract Expressionist paintings. In framing the side of the ship with the lens of the camera, Williams reveals the resemblance between the uncalculated marks left on the boat by workers, water, and time, and the more purposeful acts of the artist, who paints, adds wash, scrapes, and repaints. Rust cascading from a spout recalls paint dripping down in paintings by Jackson Pollock, Willem DeKooning, and Joan Mitchell. The black streaks left by tugboats resemble brush strokes.

A few months after our studio visit, I returned to Houston, this time with plans to ride the boat with Williams. I wanted to see the view from the Sam Houston deck and compare it to Williams' new work. In the midst of Houston's somewhat decrepit industrial zone, the Port of

Houston Authority has made provisions for tourists, with a brick gazebo providing protection from the sun and a tidy path leading to the dock. They are clearly prepared for lines and crowds here, although there were none when we arrived. In fact, there was no one else at the dock (aside from the crew), which made Williams a little nervous – if there are not enough passengers, the Sam Houston does not ride. Fortunately, a big yellow school bus deposited around thirty children from Port Houston Elementary, and we departed promptly at 10:00.

The first thing I noticed as the boat left the dock was the mass of garbage accumulating under the dock. There was a gentle breeze, making the heat and humidity bearable, but it also carried a distinct industrial odor, a spicy stew of garbage and chemicals. I remembered a photograph in Williams' studio, with an Aquafina water bottle floating in the water, its blue and white label bright and legible, the clear plastic sparkling in the sun. "What in life may be repellent can be the opposite in an image," Williams told me. "I didn't try to avoid the garbage and in some cases, I included it deliberately." Williams finds the channel has its own beauty, its own aesthetic, to which he draws our attention.

For Williams, the Sam Houston provides an escape from what he calls "the culture of the Galleria." His abstract photographs provide a different view of the city. Not the sprawling shopping centers or the Astrodome, or the new wing of the Museum of Fine Arts. Not the famed post-modernist skyline. This Houston is old and dilapidated. A visit to the Port is a reminder that there is still a physical economy, and that the stuff of life cannot actually travel through a modem. Material goods still cross the ocean on ships, piled high in storage containers. They are part of a world that is dirty and smelly and real.

As we passed men operating cranes and carrying barrels onto barges, I couldn't help thinking of the new wing of the M.F.A. (which I had visited the previous day), with its high ceilings and hardwood floors, its display of wealth and its echoes of the Metropolitan Museum, its obvious striving to be "world class." There is a painting there by Panini of the interior of St. Peter's in Rome. It caught my attention because of the assortment of people the artist depicted in the church. Some stroll in gowns or fancy suits while others sit on the floor in rags, the classes rubbing up against each other in the public spaces of the city. I thought of what it would be like to live in Italy, among the ruins of a previous culture, everyone converging on piazzas built in past centuries. In Houston, history is too often pushed out of view, the social classes separated. The city is mythically new, its economic history hidden and a good portion of its "culture" imported from afar. Through the eyes of the artist, however, we see another version of the city's history, thick with ambiance, and sitting in its own smelly backyard.

As the Sam Houston passed through the channel, Williams pointed out the bottoms of the barges, visible only when the ships are in port, without cargo to weigh them down. This is what he photographs. This is where the texture is. Occasionally, I could see him out of the corner of my eye, taking pictures as we passed a particularly interesting ship. As we traveled along the ship's side, he was creating a series of like images. He explained to me that working in series, he found subtle differences from photograph to photograph, which makes the work interesting to him – to see how the slightest difference in marking and weathering alters the entire picture. By simplifying and reducing the variables in his work (i.e., shifting away from photomontage) he

opens up the possibility for unlimited variation.

When Williams finishes shooting pictures of a boat, he notes its name, recording and honoring the ship's identity, and preserving the connection between the abstract photographs and the very concrete vessels.

The day we toured the channel together, the air was heavy and humid, a typical May day. He explained there is a lot of glare this time of year. In winter, the light is stronger and brighter, producing the lush, saturated colors of the work I had seen in his studio. The humidity and the cumulus clouds that arrive when Texas heats up produce glare, and the resulting photographs are darker and more austere. Casey says he's working up the nerve to print some of these images, because he wants to expand his range. There have been images he didn't like in the past, that he found ugly at first, but which later grew on him. The beauty emerged and made itself known over time. This is really what the series is about: finding the aesthetic in what is generally considered unsightly. It is the artist's gift, to help us see with new eyes.

In Casey Williams' new work, we not only see the Port of Houston afresh, we see it through the lens of art history, in particular Abstract Expressionist painting. Living in Houston has provided him with the opportunity to see many paintings by Jackson Pollock, Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko, and others, as they rotate through the galleries of the Menil Collection. The most obvious connection is to the work of Mark Rothko, especially the most recent work, which is vertical (achieved by masking either side of the lens). In shifting to abstraction, Williams wanted to revisit issues he had explored in college when he was studying painting. At the same time, he has continued his interest in the illusion of space in photography. By repeating the same structural system, he wants to discover how far the structure can be pushed until the work becomes off-balance.

Near the end of the tour, one of the young students approached us and asked me what we were doing. After I explained, Williams smiled and said she seemed to understand better than most of the adults who ask him questions. And he is approached frequently. Once someone asked if he was taking pictures for a lawsuit against the Port of Houston Authority: the photograph as evidence, serving a utilitarian purpose. He said most people have a hard time understanding what he is doing out there, an adult man taking a boat ride in the middle of the day, in the middle of the week, shooting some pictures. It's unproductive. That is why making art is still a radical act. While the world carries on with its cell phones and Palm Pilots and high-speed modems, it is important that someone stand still, observing. We need artists to challenge us and question our assumptions – about the nature of art, and the contents of our world.

Austin writer and art historian Sandra Goldman has written on contemporary art for numerous publications, and is at work on a book about the artist Hannah Wilke. Casey Williams' photos (all ink-jet print on satin on stretcher) are courtesy of the artist