

AUBREY
WILLIAMS
Edited by Reyahn King

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This catalogue accompanies the exhibitions

Aubrey Williams: Atlantic Fire

Walker Art Gallery 15 January – 11 April 2010
and

Aubrey Williams: Now and Coming Time

October Gallery 4 February – 3 April 2010

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Hymn to the Sun IV, 1984 (Olmec Maya series)

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NATIONAL MUSEUMS **LIVERPOOL**

PREFACE

*"I consider myself very fortunate to be alive and working
within the last freedom left to mankind – ART."*

Aubrey Williams, 1985



(1) *Dawn & Evening Star*, 1982 (Olmec Maya series)
Oil on canvas, 132 x 208 cm

Aubrey Williams came with *Atlantic Fire* and shed light onto *Now and Coming Time*. Highly intelligent and well-read, open to the new and hoping for like-minded discourse, he came to Europe from Guyana in the early 1950s to find an art world concerned mainly with itself and convinced that no avant-garde existed beyond its cultural borders. Williams helped pave the way for the very recent willingness to view art without preconceived bias, without attachment to any cultural region or nation state. No matter what his subject: the demise of native Mesoamerican civilisations through ecological destruction, the visual expression of Shostakovich's music, the painterly exploration of our cosmos, or the essential character of birds, Williams helped change what he referred to as the 'real seeing of the world'.

October Gallery opened in Bloomsbury, in 1979, to exhibit the *Transvanguard*, the cross-cultural avant-garde, and has represented Aubrey Williams since his first solo show at the Gallery in 1984, *Olmec Maya and Now*. The Gallery has provided a platform for the emergence of some of the most innovative and exciting artists of our time. The Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool, opened just over 130 years ago, and holds one of the outstanding collections of fine and decorative art in Europe. It continues to present the best art to the general public through historic, contemporary and thematic exhibitions. These two galleries have joined forces to produce two linked and overlapping exhibitions of Williams' work together with this publication, to establish new insights into one of the twentieth century's great artistic spirits.

Both galleries are extremely indebted to Eve Williams, Maridowa Williams and to the Aubrey Williams Committee for their generous help and cooperation. We are grateful for the thoughtful and provocative essays from Mel Gooding and Leon Wainwright in this catalogue, and delighted to reprint excerpts from the stimulating interview between Rasheed Araeen and Aubrey Williams, first published in *Third Text* in 1987. Our thanks are also due to Lynne Truss and Chris Wilson for lending work for the Walker Art Gallery exhibition and to all those at National Museums Liverpool and October Gallery who have contributed their time and expertise to making the exhibitions and this catalogue possible. Our special thanks are dedicated to the curators of these twin exhibitions: Reyahn King, Director of Art Galleries, National Museums Liverpool and Elisabeth Lalouschek, Artistic Director, October Gallery.

Chili Hawes

Director
October Gallery

David Fleming

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AUBREY WILLIAMS: ATLANTIC FIRE

Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool
15 January - 11 April 2010

AUBREY WILLIAMS: NOW AND COMING TIME

October Gallery, London
4 February - 3 April 2010

FOREWORD

By Reyahn King

Aubrey Williams is an artist whose appeal crosses boundaries. Born in Guyana, he moved to London to practise as an artist, exhibiting extensively in England and Europe from the late 1950s. From 1970 Williams spent periods working in studios in Jamaica and Florida, returning to Guyana occasionally to take active part in events such as the 1972 Carifesta festival. The significance of Williams' transatlantic life for his art was in the absorption of multiple traditions, including American Abstract Expressionism and the historical Central and South American cultures that were his driving force. The essays in this catalogue contribute to an ongoing reassessment of Williams as an important international artist.

Mel Gooding's essay explains the context of Williams' arrival and early career in London in the late 1950s and 1960s and critically questions how it was that this major British post-war artist was overlooked. Gooding describes Williams' abstraction and its modernist sources, positioning him within a British art tradition exemplified by artists like Patrick Heron and John Hoyland. Both Gooding and Leon Wainwright demonstrate that it was Williams' very strengths of global experience and his deep knowledge expressed subtly in painting that British peers failed to understand or feel. Gooding's essay is an effective riposte to the failures of the art world to recognise Williams in his lifetime and Wainwright takes on the later interpretations that have risked limiting the artist to a role within political cultural agendas¹.

Coming from the art world periphery, Williams absorbed traditions centred in European and American culture and enriched them.² His friends and colleagues in the Caribbean Artists Movement led the recognition and development of distinctive literary voices and they, like him, saw similar potential in other art forms. Decades later, Andrew Dempsey's assessment of Williams confirmed 'that what this artist from the Caribbean had brought to painting in England had the kind of vitality with which writing in English had been injected by the poets and the novelists of the Caribbean such as Derek Walcott and V. S. Naipaul or ... Edward Kamau Brathwaite.'³ Williams himself knew the value of his contribution to European painting but the undermining assumptions he faced are typified by a disappointing meeting with Picasso: 'I remember the very first comment he made when we met. He said that I had a very fine African head and he would like me to pose for him. And I felt terrible. In spite of the fact that I was introduced to him as an artist, he did not think of me as another artist.'⁴

Williams resisted classification of himself or his art and although he was best known as an abstract artist, he painted representational works throughout his life. In the *Olmec Maya* series he combined abstract technique with icons of South and Central American ancient cultures. This mixing of abstract and figurative work troubled people familiar with a particular set of artistic rules that kept them separate. Wainwright argues that these rules no longer



(2) *Maya Confrontation*, 1982 (*Olmec Maya* series)
Oil on canvas, 120 x 178 cm

apply and suggests that other challenges to modernism, and art practice since Williams' death, enable us now to see Williams as a visionary artist ahead of his time.

In 2010, over ten years since the *Aubrey Williams* exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery, two solo exhibitions are being held concurrently in the North and the South of England. The October Gallery, mounting *Aubrey Williams: Now and Coming Time* in London, has consistently drawn attention to the importance of Williams' work, while the exhibition *Aubrey Williams: Atlantic Fire* at the Walker Art Gallery in Liverpool is the first time that a solo exhibition of his work has been held in one of the UK's national museums.

These exhibitions acknowledge and celebrate the way that Williams used the cultural inheritance of Carib, Warrau and Arawak peoples and Maya, Olmec, Aztec, Toltec and Inca civilisations to create masterpieces of modern art. Taking inspiration from close acquaintance with the Warrau people and their living artistic culture, Williams developed a passion for the historic indigenous cultures in Central and South America in and beyond Guyana.⁵ The references to these in his work are not illustrations. Titles such as *Bonampak* are not to be interpreted literally. Rather, these historic cultures emerge as expressions of a deeply felt and researched inheritance of an artist of subtlety and power. Williams claimed them because they enabled him to find a distinctly Caribbean artistic language: 'I firmly feel that such art should be automatically appreciated by people from the Caribbean and from Guyana because they share the same environment.'⁶ At the same time, he considered that the Olmec and Mayan civilisations, in particular, could and should be meaningful and an inspiration for everyone,

regardless of background. Williams understood that the destruction that took place in the Americas of the past and what happens now in South American forests has global relevance. Today, when our newspapers inform us about the interconnected environmental state of our world, we may more easily appreciate Williams' timeless vision.

There have been some longstanding individual champions of Williams' work, notably Anne Walmsley, Guy Brett and Rasheed Araeen, whose 1987 interview remains an insightful resource. Nevertheless, full recognition is overdue. His independent and intelligent approach to modern painting, the authenticity of his concerns, and the emotional strength and impact of his work mean that Williams is an artist who can no longer be overlooked.

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- 1 See also R. ARAEEN. (2006) 'When the Naughty Children of Empire Come Home to Roost'. *Third Text*. Vol 20 (Issue 2) pp. 233-239.
 - 2 Authors who have made powerful arguments along these lines include Kobena Mercer (K. MERCER. (2006) 'Black Atlantic Abstraction: Aubrey Williams and Frank Bowling'. In: K. MERCER. (2006) *Discrepant Abstraction*. InIVA / MIT. London / Mass. pp. 207-219) and Mel Gooding in 'Aubrey Williams: The Making of a British Artist' in this catalogue. pp. 38-44.
 - 3 A. DEMPSEY. (1998) 'Curator's Foreword'. In: WHITECHAPEL GALLERY in association with InIVA Institute of International Visual Arts. *Aubrey Williams*. [exhibition catalogue 12 June – 16 August] InIVA Institute of International Visual Arts. London. p. 12.
 - 4 R. ARAEEN. Excerpts from 'Conversation with Aubrey Williams'. Reprinted in this catalogue. pp. 17-18. Originally published in *Third Text*. (2) pp. 25-52.
 - 5 Williams frequently used the term pre-Columbian to describe the group of cultures that inspired him and it is still one of the clearest



- ways of referring to cultures prior to European contact. However, some people today object to Central and South American history being defined by the arrival of Columbus. Specialists now tend to use Mesoamerican but this is not a well known term and defines a clear geographic area that does not match Williams' breadth of knowledge. The term Amerindian is also widely used but not considered appropriate by others who prefer indigenous or Native. There is ongoing debate around correct terminology in this area and throughout this publication authors have used the terminology they carefully consider most appropriate. Where possible, specific terms to describe the culture referred to are used in this publication. However, Williams' interest covered several peoples and civilisations and it is neither possible, nor helpful to the meaning of his art, to attempt to define which specifically is referenced.
- 6 A. WILLIAMS. (1967) 'The Predicament of the Artist in the Caribbean'. Talk given at CAM Conference, Canterbury, 16 September 1967. Reprinted in A. WALMSLEY. (1990) *Guyana Dreaming: The Art of Aubrey Williams*. Dangaroo Press. Aarhus, Denmark. p. 19.

left: (3) *Hymn to the Sun IV*, 1984
(Olmec Maya series)
Oil on canvas, 119 x 178 cm

right: (4) *Symphony*, 1985
Oil on canvas, 125 x 183 cm