



Art Talk with Visual Artist and Architect Amanda Williams

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"The arts matter because they continue to be the most effective way to inspire societal change through imaginative possibility."
— Amanda Williams

Amanda Williams. Photo by Anne Ryan

An abandoned house usually signals a community in decline, hopelessness. Award-winning, Chicago-based artist [Amanda Williams](#) has a different view. By painting derelict structures in colors inspired by the visual vernacular of the community—hair products, local fast-food joints—Williams subverts them into beacons of hope. These public artworks, known as the *Color(ed) Theory* project, encourage the community to come together to meditate on what they've lost as the first step in reclaiming and revitalizing their neighborhoods. As Williams explained over e-mail, she's interested in combining her two art forms so they become catalysts for making communities thrive. In addition to a busy visual arts career, which includes traditional paintings and papercut maps as well as public art, Williams also teaches architecture at Chicago's Illinois Institute of Technology, is a sought-after lecturer, and has participated widely in individual and group shows, including an entry in the 2015 Chicago Architecture Biennial. Here's our interview with Williams in which she talks about her obsessions as an artist, the most important thing she tells her students, and the origins of *Color(ed) Theory*.

NEA: What was your journey to becoming a working artist?

AMANDA WILLIAMS: I studied architecture at Cornell University and practiced in the Bay Area for several years before becoming a working artist. I took the traditional studio art sequence as my electives in college and had always been passionate about art but never thought of it as a vocation. It was a little risk-taking and encouragement from my family and my then employers to step out on faith that started the journey in earnest. In hindsight it's obvious that it was the path I was destined for.

NEA: How does your work as an architect inform your visual arts practice and vice versa?

WILLIAMS: The two are singular for me. It's like asking about me being a black woman. Which is first? Which informs which? It's so fluid and messy and runny. I used to try to deconstruct it, but got fed up and just toggle back and forth as needed; It's like Spanglish.

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NEA: To borrow the language of the non-profit world, what's your "mission statement" as an artist?

WILLIAMS: My tag line is generally that I am interested in combining art and architecture as catalysts for making cities (namely Chicago) thrive. It sounds a bit like a hokey campaign slogan—"make America great..."—but it's helped guide the kinds of projects I take on.

NEA: What are your obsessions as an artist?

WILLIAMS: I'm generally obsessed with color. It sounds cliché whenever I read it in my artist statement but it really is my everything. The question(s) always orbit around the overlap of race, space, color, and maybe coded language or double entendres. I'm invested in constructing new potentials and narratives about personal identity and the connections to social and physical place. This is more explicitly being tested in the site-specific works and works on paper than in the paintings. I am actively struggling to translate those ruminations into a more coherent question in the paintings. The search for that question is ever present.



Ultrasheen (winter). Amanda Williams. latex paint, abandoned house, 2014. Photo courtesy of the artist

NEA: Your paintings have such interesting titles, such as *On His Toes for All of Us* and *Pretend is Water, Real is This*. What's the relationship between the title and the work for you?

WILLIAMS: Titles are a little bit of the soul of my paintings. Like names for your kids, these titles have the potential to inform their personality and how they will be received by the world. They offer not only another layer of meaning for the work—often a coded layer—but also a point of entry for audiences that haven't had a relationship with contemporary abstraction. They have also become an extended dialogue with followers of my work. One long run on sentence! The titles usually come long before the work. Sometimes years. And then I either start trying to make a work within the title's spirit, or I begin a work that is highly process-oriented and as it begins to talk back I realize it might fit a title. Works called "(untitled)" are ones that came to full fruition without that fit ever revealing itself.

NEA: Will you please talk about your *Color(ed) Theory* project. What was its genesis?

WILLIAMS: *Color(ed) Theory* explores how academic and theoretical definitions of color map across veiled language used in American media/popular culture to describe racially charged city spaces. What color is urban? What color is gentrification? What color is privilege? What color is poverty? As a search for answers, I painted abandoned houses on Chicago's South Side using a palette of eight culturally coded, monochromatic colors. Think a female Gordon Matta-Clark parading around as a black Josef Albers! Colors are extracted from buildings and products that are frequent urban fixtures—Currency Exchange, Flamin' Red Hots, Ultrasheen Hair Grease, to name a few. This palette combined my Ivy League academic training as an architect with my lived sensibility as a South Side native. I'm working on a system that imagines artful ways to construct new narratives about zero-value landscapes that will allow them to shed an identity of victim and embrace instead the role of active protagonist.

NEA: What are you exploring for yourself as an artist in the *Color(ed) Theory* project? What do you want viewers and members of the community to take from the project?

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WILLIAMS: *Color(ed) Theory* really comes from a very selfish place of wanting to personally understand how art, specifically paint and color, and architecture needed to work for *me*. What can my understanding and background uniquely contribute to a larger discourse? Painting at the scale of architecture. Contemplating the distance between representation and abstraction. Most architects don't build; they produce documents that communicate an action or gesture at a reduced scale for the purposes of someone else building. My gesture in *Color(ed) Theory* is 1:1. The mark is on the subject itself. It was just my need to question via a single stroke what it means to be an architect and artist. The project was/is about questions and not our typical desire to provide answers through object-making.

It was also an open-ended conversation with the community about value of place and personal agency. Can such an odd gesture inspire a shift in individual or collective thinking about how we might act upon and value our own context differently? Mad or glad, be changed.



Flamin' Red Hots. Amanda Williams. latex paint, abandoned house, 2015. Photo courtesy of the artist

NEA: Which tool—literal or metaphoric—can you not live without and why?

WILLIAMS: Metaphoric for sure! I live for ways to help connect the dots between the incomprehensible, intangible, and unrealistic to the very possible through poetic examples that the lay person can embrace

NEA: You are a professor of architecture at the Illinois Institute of Technology. What's the most important thing you want your students to take away from working with you? What's your best piece of advice for them?

WILLIAMS: It's maybe not advice, but the sentence they most dread hearing me say is: "It's your degree, I already have mine!" disabusing them of the notion that mimicry is flattery. I have no interest in them trying to please me for the sake of the grade or because they think I'm cool. I'm invested in them finding their authentic voice. That takes more work and doesn't always equate to an immediate "A" [grade]. Instead, It is often the acceptance of architectural (and/or artistic) practice as a lifelong pursuit.

NEA: How do you think about failure and success in terms of your art practice?

WILLIAMS: My husband, Jason Burns, is a former professional athlete who now trains and mentors teens who will inevitably be future professionals. So there is a neverending dinner conversation in our house about how one defines integrity and its relationship to success and optimal performance. Actively failing and embracing failure as nothing more than feedback for the next stage of your work is critical to success in any genre. Inherent in that experience is rigorous, iterative practice. Architecture school was all about that life. As a result my artistic practice in sum total has been about that. I was an athlete of art and architecture without knowing it.

NEA: Finish the sentence: The arts matter because....

WILLIAMS: The arts matter because they continue to be the most effective way to inspire societal change through imaginative possibility.