

## Why a Chicago Artist Is Connecting Blight to Gold Bricks

BY CASSIE OWENS | AUGUST 22, 2017



*From "Chicago Works: Amanda Williams" (Courtesy of Amanda Williams and McCormick Gallery)*

The gold bars inside the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago right now might remind visitors of Fort Knox. But it's faux bullion: Artist Amanda Williams works with a team of assistants, colleagues and relatives to meticulously brush salvaged bricks with imitation leaf. Sourced from demolished buildings, Williams' gold aims to quickly communicate an important question in cities navigating blight, preservation and revitalization: How should we assess the value of architecture in distressed neighborhoods?

An earlier project of Williams' made headlines in 2015 when she painted a series of houses in Chicago's South Side in bold, single colors, each shade carefully selected for its resonance within the community. Photographs of that project are on display at a new show, along with Williams' more recent brickwork. The exhibit, "Chicago Works: Amanda Williams," opened late last month and will run through the rest of 2017.

Williams is a South Side native who first studied architecture as an undergraduate at Cornell. She's been exhibiting art regularly since the early 2000s. The spark for "Color(ed) Theory," and for tackling blight as a subject through grand-scale art, came through a conversation with a colleague in 2013. Williams was discussing her hopes for a future project with Tricia Van Eck, the director of the arts nonprofit 6018 North. Van Eck replied, "So you want to paint at the scale of architecture?" Yes, she wanted to do exactly that.

"There's always this continual conversation in my head, and with others who are in similar professions or [have] like-minded thoughts about the built environment, [on] how the South Side is actually being shaped by erasure instead of addition," Williams says. "So as people who come as architects or even placemakers, what does it mean if your canvas is being constantly removed from you? Or altered without your control?"

The gold brick work began literally where "Color(ed) Theory" left off. Each house she had painted for that earlier project was slated for removal. While waiting to see when the buildings would come down, she began looking into the demolition process. "I started to research and find out that these bricks were actually financially valuable as a salvage material," she says.

# moniquemeloche

2154 W. Division Street, Chicago, IL 60622  
773.252.0299 www.moniquemeloche.com

“And so because most of these houses are built in a similar way and now being demolished en masse, you can kind of start to do back-of-the-napkin math ... . Then all of a sudden you start to think of what [that] translates into in terms of commerce, or economy or value that’s not being mined in the neighborhood,” she continues. “What happens when you realize something like that but don’t know how to capitalize on it?”

The new exhibit raises questions about, in her words, “desire and access.” There’s the distrust a resident might feel toward a new initiative after decades of disinvestment, the frustration of contending with bureaucratic slog when seeking help from city programs, the emotional weight of seeing a structure that could be an asset, but identifying the cost of rehabilitating it as fiscally impossible.

The exhibit has a would-be entrance that’s bricked off, with those golden bars, of course. There’s also a room covered with the bricks that’s visible through a narrow opening, but inaccessible to visitors. (Williams worked with the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago to offer exclusive access to the room to residents from the city’s Englewood neighborhood.)



*A painted house, "Crown Royal Bag," from "Color(ed) Theory" (Courtesy of Amanda Williams and McCormick Gallery)*

When images of “Color(ed) Theory” went viral two years ago, it provoked discussion not only among artists, but also urbanists, community organizers and preservationists. Williams was not expecting that widespread response: She made the work primarily for herself, and secondarily for people who grew up on Chicago’s South Side.

Though she has discussed the project and the issues regularly in recent years, Williams still doesn’t see a straightforward fix. To heal the built environment in distressed neighborhoods, it would call for cross-sector efforts to repair the damage of decades of institutional racism and trauma, she explains. She’s approaching it from her perspective, “without being able to clone myself to become an alderman, a land use attorney, a community organizer,” she quips.

There is a series of programs combating blight in Chicago. For example, as Next City covered last year, Chicago’s Micro Market Recovery Program cut the number of vacant buildings by nearly half in the West Humboldt Park neighborhood in a five-year span. Williams cites the Cook County Land Bank Authority, the Chicago Anti-Eviction Campaign and the Sweet Water Foundation, an urban agriculture-focused educational organization, as examples of programs that “get it right.”

“Everybody’s gotta leverage their best self,” she says. “And then they’ve got to double down on how they’ll contribute to the myriad of issues.”