



ART TALK: ARTIST WILLIAM VILLALONGO AND HIS OTHERWORLD

For the second time around AMMO Magazine caught up with Brooklyn native artist William Villalongo to discuss his current exhibit, "[Mind, Body & Soul](#)," at [Susan Inglett Gallery \(NYC\)](#) as well as his participation in the "Greater New York!" group show at the MoMA PS1.

What's Your AMMO?

Before finishing this group of art works, I visited a good friend that lives just outside Jackson Hole, Wyoming. The Tetons just sit there looming majestically, dwarfing everything in existence. I'd never been to that part of the U.S. before. I did Yellowstone and a bunch of hiking. I felt like an ant and I loved it! It was definitely mind blowing and invigorating.

The last time we spoke to you was in 2010 and your work then featured women exposed in a similar way as this new body of work. What was the inspiration this time around?

The language of "exposing" the female subject for me has the connotation of presenting her vulnerable, unprotected and docile, existing solely for the desire of a presumed male viewer. Indeed, this is the history of this painting genre, but my interest in it is not about further abuse to the female body. My figures are not people they are ideas. I don't use live models. I have a sense of how the figures will engage in a painting and then I usually work from reproductions and my knowledge of human anatomy. My figures are rooted in a painting history and a painting fiction in order build narrative. This narrative is centered in a fictional society of mostly black women building their own world out of Abstract paintings and as abstract beings. The genre I'm



speaking of is the Nymph or Siren in Romantic Period paintings, later of the “Odalisque” or “Bather” replaces the mythological stripping away her ancient narrative. It’s hard to miss one if you frequent museums, but advertising has long appropriated the genre as well. From Botticelli to Bey we are saturated with this kind of image. Historically these are paintings of white women. In Harem scenes, which were popular in 19th Century Painting, one might find a black woman or sister slaves as they have been referred to. A slave for a slave.

I started working with this genre in 2010 then as now my interest are about finding a space in painting and in Painting histories to speak to the lack of the black presence within those histories. As a painter it is a starting place to generate narrative and as the “gaze” is at the center of this genre so are the complexities of seeing and being seen. Being other. So I am in a painting time machine which is hell bent on going in all directions at once for a very precise reason which is to make images that are not didactic, yet speak to the impossible history and existence of being in a black body. I want a range of metaphor and feeling in my paintings from the humorous to the tragic. I’m fine with the “problematic” nature of being a man painting women if it means I can bring the viewer into a familiar place and have them reconsider their expectations of what they should find there.

The real difference now, 2015 from 2010 while working within this constructed narrative is that I don’t feel as tightly bound to historical references as I once did and the male figure is starting to enter the paintings. I feel a fluency with a cast of characters that I can speak with and exist solely for the fiction of the painting. With the paintings in Mind, Body & Soul I was inspired by the very things those words imply a connectivity between consciousness, physicality and interiority.

There has been an extreme amount of racial tension in the last 5 years. Has that affected your work?

Well, Men and text or language has entered the paintings. The men exist within the velvety borders of the paintings they come in and out of visibility sometimes just eyes lurking in dark flora. There are two prominent text works in the show. The letters are cut from velvety paper which has constellations printed on it. The letters are mounted on the pages of a human anatomy coloring book featuring the respiratory system. They read “You Matter” and “We Can’t Breathe.” As a black male it is hard no to think about the recurring lynching in the present and more specifically, as a New Yorker, the Eric Gardner lynching. It is hard not to contemplate the significance of being in the minority of a minority of black men, that is, black men participating in our society and seemingly without the immediate threat of violence towards their body. As a figurative painter, painting such bodies their postures and movements in space, their anatomy one is ultimately talking about life and the imagining of a reflexive humanity. One wants to speak of a shared humanity, but the quality of how we share it needs to be addressed, particularly in an American society where it is clearly necessary to be reminded that black people and particularly young black men are not disposable. I used the collective pronouns “You” and “We” in these turns of phrase in order to speak beyond the aware community, I want the unaware viewer to feel part of it, to be implicated, to be confronted with the opportunity of awareness. I want this language to overlap with the imagery; it is

the truest I could be to the notion of consciousness or “Mind” in making this new work. For me painting is not escape, it is metaphor.

With the Mind Body & Soul exhibit, you have mixed your “Otherworld” with this one. What do you hope this presents to the viewer?

I wouldn't say I mixed them as much as made an environment in which one hopes to inform the other. The paintings in Mind, Body & Soul are ultimately about painting, but they are also about transitioning, the passing of time and its indicators, revelation and obscurity. The paintings are metaphorical and long to sit in a completely emotive existence or a world of feeling. I am literally making them with a velvety medium that one wants to touch or to feel. Images are pre-verbal they attach themselves to the viewer's consciousness and produce meaning that I could never intend and this type of participation is what makes art rich and complex, a catalyst for discovery. It puts us back in relationship to ourselves for better or for worse. I intervened a little into this dynamic with the text works, because the phrases “You Matter”, “Black Lives Matter” and “We Can't Breathe” deal with the physiology and phenomena present in the paintings. They imply dark matter, life and the bodily functions of the human organism. So what I hope to present to the viewer is an opportunity to think about these things in a way that the 24-hour news cycle could never provide and a space of reflection to question their proximity to any of this.

The Black female is present in all of your work as well as a strong fixture in the current #BlackLivesMatter movement. What are your beliefs in her role both in your work and in the current cultural environment?

I believe the statistics in the U.S. are 1 in every 15 black men and 1 in every 36 Hispanic men are incarcerated in comparison to 1 in every 106 white men. The number of black men not participating in society increases when one considers military deployment and early death rates due to homicide or health issues. The Black female presence is crucial because she is more visible in society than black men. In my paintings she exists in the space of the vignette, the place of sight. It is the readable narrative moment and the light piercing through a dark forest. Given these statistics it is not far off to say that the black female presence makes it possible for black male humanity to be visible at all. Sadly and too often it is her pain that makes his humanity visible. There is perhaps even a sick obsession with her pain and her loss for the media and for Hollywood. It is inspiring when women in the #BlackLivesMatter movement and in society in general make the demand to be heard. The shift from pain and victimization to action is powerful and challenges the master narrative of helplessness in the face of terror.

Your work is also showing in the Greater New York group show at the MoMA PS1. Where the pieces specifically created for this show?

The works in the Greater New York 2015 show are from 2010. The curators were interested in a progression of ideas over time and between artists at different stages in their career. It's actually nice to be able to see a painting shown again after a number of years it is a marker of time and growth and extremely valuable to me. The curatorial decision strikes me as a refreshing concern for actual observation and thought.

Being included in such a large show does this ever seem overwhelming?

I was included in the Greater New York 2005 exhibition. 10 years have passed. It was pretty overwhelming then. I had only begun to exhibit my work and I wasn't as familiar with the various art worlds I inhabit fluently now. I knew I was committed to being an artist and I was learning on the job what that meant. Many experiences have shaped and informed my work and life since then, now it just feel nice to be recognized and in the context so many wonderful artists.

Does living in Brooklyn ever influence your work and how?

Well, there are certainly a lot of beautiful black folk to observe in Brooklyn. I love the pace of Brooklyn and it's where I live and work. Its packed full of creative people and that gives it a special kind of energy.

Who are you listening to musically currently?

I've been feeling Bilal's In Another Life album. I'm an old soul head. My Mom had me listening to Betty Wright in the crib. I was obsessed with Hip Hop music when I was younger, still love anything 90's. These days, I'm mainly fascinated with blowing the dust off of some old funk or soul I just discovered.

Head over to Susan Inglett Gallery before the "Mind, Body, & Soul" exhibit closes this weekend.

williamvillalongo.com