

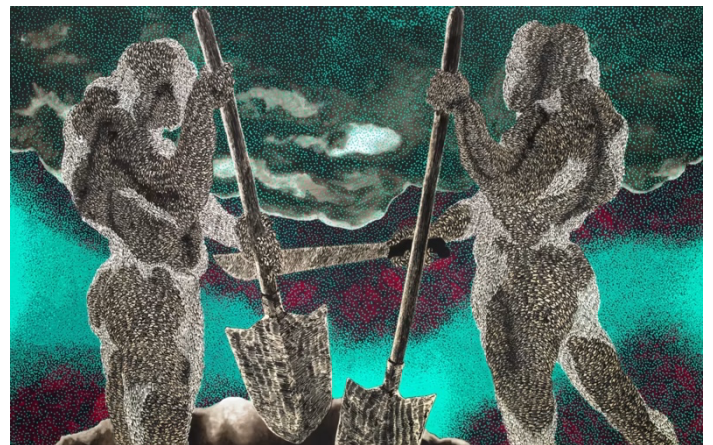
## **Financial Times, London, March 6, 2023**

### **Didier William: artist who gouges deep into his heritage**

With his work on show in North Miami, the Haitian-American talks about his sculptural approach to painting and printmaking

By Carolin Roux

In February this year, the artist Didier William was presented with the keys to the city of North Miami, Florida, a place he arrived in 34 years ago, aged six. William was born in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, and his heritage rumbles through his large bold paintings where he unravels both autobiographical memories and broader questions of belonging and identity. "Jumping between micro and macro," says William of his focus. "I've never had any qualms about that." This significant honour — bestowed by the mayor of North Miami, Alix Desulme, a fellow Haitian-American — could



be considered William's second from the city in just a few months. The first was the opening of his biggest institutional solo show to date in November at the Museum of Contemporary Art North Miami. Just minutes from where William grew up, the museum is showing several series of his visceral, vibrant paintings until the end of April, many of them borrowed from enthusiastic private collectors. "I wanted the exhibition to offer an experience and a narrative and to show the whole person, in the neighbourhood where he grew up," says its curator Erica Moiah James, who first met William in 2014. "I'm interested in all the paths Didier goes down." The first painting that visitors see is of William himself with his husband Justin (a mental health therapist) as two heroic figures lifting aloft their first child, Ava, against a burning red sky. Whether it is evoking the triumph or the isolation of the queer family (which now includes five-month-old Olivier) is open to question: the artist sometimes uses the word "malleable" to describe his work.

William, who studied painting at the prestigious Maryland Institute College of Art and then printmaking at Yale, makes intensely layered and detailed work that pairs the precise crafts of printmaking and carving into wood, with painting in richly hued acrylics and oils. It mingles the legacies of western art movements, from romanticism to Post-Impressionism, with his own jagged, restless aesthetic. No one and nothing is at rest here. It really packs a punch. He chose to work on wood, not canvas, when he found that it could be both additive and subtractive. "I could gouge right into the surface," he says. "Printmaking is three-dimensional and I see the paintings that result from my process as low-relief sculptures, with different layers being forced into tension." William's personal experience and the broader themes of immigrant and queer identity and Haitian history have been carefully teased out by Moiah James from a decade's work, made first in Brooklyn where William moved after Maryland, then in Philadelphia where he now lives with his family. (He holds a post at Rutgers University an hour away: assistant professor of expanded print.) Two eerie paintings of the first homes his family occupied in Miami are completely new, brought about by William's return to the city in preparation for the exhibition.



“Once the show had been confirmed, his feelings about Miami began to bubble up again,” says Moiah James. William says that he sees the homes as “sacred sites, architectural relics. I wanted to protect the integrity of those spaces because they protected me.” And yet, with a surreal twist, they are shown as floating containers, buoyed up on a confusion of human limbs; homes without foundations. “As I relived those early experiences, I couldn’t help thinking now how difficult it must have been for my parents. It was a frenetic time,” says William. “But the paintings are not an act of catharsis.

When I make them, I have already made peace with the subject. It’s about extension and mythology.” He moves smoothly between his points of interest: on one wall a depiction of Dantor, a senior spirit in Haitian voodoo cradling her daughter Anais; on another the battered Toyota in which William — who says he initially negotiated his sexuality by watching episodes of TV comedy series *The Golden Girls* — first made out. “I really wanted to absorb all things American and discovered that TV show. It offered an incredible lesson on gender and gender performance in the bodies of four women trying to reimagine their lives outside of being wives and mothers. I didn’t have the language for queerness, but this was a lesson in it.”

A steaming tureen of soup *joumou* reminds us of the liberation of Haiti in 1803 from the French. The dish of winter squash and beef — once made by slaves for the exclusive delight of their colonisers — is eaten on New Year’s Day. (William’s mother became a cook when she arrived in the US; she now runs her own restaurant in Fort Lauderdale.) Elsewhere, the drama of Jacques-Louis David’s “The Death of Marat” is replayed, the main character recast by William as a woman, brandishing a machete and — furiously emerging from the famous bath — very far from dead. “I’m interested in the parallels of the French Revolution and the Haitian revolution,” he says. William has never been back to Haiti. “The reality of immigration is the imaginary place, the porous relationship to borders,” he says, and the exhibition at MOCA is called *Nou Kite Tout Sa Dèyè*, a phrase repeated by his mother throughout his childhood, meaning “we’ve left it all behind”. But not completely. The exhibition title and all the captions in the show are in Kreyol first; the Haitian language becomes an entity and thus an exhibit in itself. “I wanted to invert the relationship that traditionally makes us, the immigrants, work harder,” says William, who was the first in his family to learn English, becoming aged seven its *de facto* spokesperson. “Translation is labour. On the opening night, I got a lot of thanks for it.” Ten years ago, William started to work with a new motif, covering the skin of his figurative subjects with a mass of deeply gouged eyes. It was his personal reaction to the killing of Trayvon Martin in 2012. “It is a skin that can see, that builds a circuit of looking,” he says. The multiple stare is everywhere — both unsettling and with a contemplative power in its outward gaze, a reversal of the annihilating gaze bestowed so often on the immigrant. It makes the viewer look back and look closely. Indeed, if part of William’s mission is to make us look and think, it is mission accomplished.

‘*Nou Kite Tout Sa Dèyè*’ is at MOCA until April 16. ‘*Things Like This Don’t Happen Here*’ is at James Fuentes, Los Angeles, March 25-May 13