

## ARTFORUM

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**SUE WILLIAMS****LOUGHELTON GALLERY**

Deals are made, hearts are broken, but Sue Williams will have none of that. The great appeal of her work lies in its utter refusal to perpetuate any sense of business as usual. This stance, arrived at through adamant hyperbole and acerbic humor, enables the artist to target certain patriarchal power relations in their most banal and perverse forms. Take *Better Luck Next Time*, 1989, a cluster of grisaille vignettes which snowballs into a seething fatalism. Smack dab in the middle of the picture stands a generic, suburban home with the words "BETTER LUCK NEXT" running up the sidewalk and the word "TIME" wafting out the chimney. Visions of quiet horror orbit this domestic nucleus, including a chart tracing the decline of a woman's body from ages 15-40 (and thus her reduced "worth") alongside an idealized couple—prototypical beautiful people—clad in nothing but underwear emblazoned with the starburst legend "FINAL INCARNATION." According to this pessimistic logic, founding a family must always yield ever-diminishing returns, the housewife's status depreciating accordingly. Similar anxieties haunt another painting called *See Price List*, 1989. Three figures appear before a backdrop of florid wallpaper, all cradling telephone receivers against their ears. They're labelled "A," "B," and "C." The first, a woman, with her lips pursed in a perfect "O" looks scandalized; the second, a man with knitted brows, registers concern; the third, a vixen complete with bouffant hairdo, licks her lips lasciviously. The trio suggests a Party-Line or Date-

Line encounter: decisions, decisions.

Willful naïveté epitomizes Williams' funky style, placing her in the company of Mike Kelley, Howard Finster, Jonathan Borofsky, Jessica Diamond, Walter Gumbo, and Lynda Barry. The urge toward deliberate formal degeneration makes the question of generalized quotation central to this highly mannered version of esthetic competence. Recognizability is what's at stake; it becomes the platform from which the artist speaks. Williams' eloquence rests on her ability to summon kitsch sources (i.e., advertising, illustration, cartoons) while holding them at arm's length. And if kitsch is an expression of bourgeois guilt, as Walter Benjamin maintains, then such a feat becomes especially tricky. The sight of Williams' scenes can make us into unwitting accomplices who claim, "I didn't see a thing."

While Williams aims to frustrate simplistic moral conclusions, at times things get needlessly confused. In *Money is Congealed Energy*, 1989, a central image of a man with a third eye, two ominous spirals of dollar bills, and a lewd ball with female dancers in partial dishabille are set against a pulsing, Bridget Riley-inspired background. But aside from the revulsion the work expresses, this formulation offers no advantage over the idea that capital is congealed labor; in fact, it obscures that relation by attributing to money a pseudo-comic genesis. The danger remains that Williams' righteous indignation might dwindle into the ingratiating eccentricities of Essene Rabbi Dr. Bronner's soap labels or the sly, crackpot persona of Rev. Howard Finster. Rather, the challenge is to trace that anger back to its source in a system of valuation that is predicated on the function of women as exchange objects. At her best, Williams does offer us brief, startling glimpses of that system at work.

—John Miller