

Philemona
Williamson
*The Borders
of Innocence*

18 novembre - 30 décembre 2023
/ November 18 - December 30, 2023

Biographie / Biography

Philemona Williamson

**Actualités / What's on**

- 18/11 - 30/12/2023, *The Borders of Innocence*, Semiose, France (FR) - solo exhibition
- 05/10/2023 - 26/01/2024, *Je ne suis pas ce que tu vois de moi*, Fondation Francès, Clichy (FR) - group exhibition
- 2022: Winner of the *Anonymous Was A Woman* prize

L'artiste Philemona Williamson (née en 1951) associe des récits personnels et d'autres, plus universels, dans des peintures de grand format aux couleurs vives, qui représentent des enfants et des adolescents, souvent engagés dans des situations mystérieuses. Elle peint ses personnages directement sur la toile, sans croquis préalable. De cette façon, ses tableaux deviennent des palimpsestes qui racontent leur propre histoire où, au travers des couches successives, des figures et des scènes esquissées, puis parfois abandonnées, apparaissent en transparence. Les œuvres de Williamson sont profondément ancrées dans ses souvenirs d'enfance et incluent souvent des références à des objets de collection, tels que des poupées typiques de la culture populaire américaine qui appartiennent à l'artiste. Ces œuvres sont ainsi une invitation à explorer des histoires mystérieuses et inachevées.

Philemona Williamson a exposé dans de nombreuses institutions américaines, depuis sa première exposition personnelle au Queens Museum of Art en 1988, jusqu'à *Metaphorical Narratives*, au Montclair Art Museum, New Jersey, en 2017, qui couvrait ses trente années de carrière artistique. Ses œuvres figurent dans de nombreuses collections publiques à travers les États-Unis, et elle a été chargée de plusieurs projets publics, notamment par la New York Metropolitan Transport Authority. En 2022, elle a été l'une des quinze lauréates du prix *Anonymous Was A Woman*, décerné chaque année depuis 1986 à des femmes artistes âgées de plus de 40 ans, en reconnaissance de leur travail passé et futur.

The African-American artist Philemona Williamson (b. 1951) brings together personal and more universal narratives in her brightly colored, large format paintings that portray children and teenagers, often in mysterious situations. She paints directly onto her canvases without preliminary sketches and her paintings thus resemble palimpsests telling their own stories, with multiple layers, figures and scenes appearing across the support, before seemingly being abandoned. Williamson's works are deeply rooted in her childhood memories and include references to memorabilia, such as dolls typical of American popular culture from the artist's personal collection, and as such are an invitation to explore mysterious and unfinished tales.

Williamson has been exhibited in numerous American institutions, from her debut solo show at the Queens Museum of Art in 1988, to *Metaphorical Narratives*, at the Montclair Art Museum, New Jersey, in 2017, which spanned the thirty years of her artistic career. Her works can be seen in many public collections across the USA and she has been commissioned for several public projects, most notably by the New York Metropolitan Transport Authority. In 2022, she was one of fifteen recipients of the *Anonymous Was A Woman* prize, awarded annually since 1986 to women artists over the age of 40, in recognition of their previous and future work.



Press Release

November 18th
December 30th, 2023Opening
Saturday, November 18th
from 11am to 8pm

The Borders of Innocence

Philemona Williamson

In her more than four decades-long distinguished career, the American artist Philemona Williamson has created an evocative and compelling body of work that she describes as “visual poems.” Through the veil of personal memory, Williamson’s opaque narratives recall the beauty, drama, and vagaries of innocence. In her paintings, youthful bodies, toys, flora and fauna float and frolic in vibrantly colored dreamscapes. But memory is an unreliable narrator and Williamson’s captivating stories are fragmented, mysterious, and open to interpretation.

Williamson has lived and worked in and around New York City and northern New Jersey her entire life. She developed her artistic talent as an adolescent. In 1969, she began studying art at Bennington College in Vermont. There she realized that American abstraction was emphasized yet she was more interested in working with the figure. She went on to graduate study at New York University where her interest in figurative and narrative painting began to flourish. She absorbed the work of historical artists such as Piero della Francesca, Hieronymus Bosch, Jacques-Louis David, Gustave Courbet, Diego Rivera, Paula Rego and Benny Andrews who informed her unique vision. As Williamson’s career developed, she taught art at several American universities, received fellowships, numerous grants, and awards. But Williamson is first and foremost a painter and for the last thirty-five years her works have been featured in solo and group exhibitions in museums and galleries across the United States.

As an African American artist working in the United States, Williamson faced the pressure to engage with the politics and history of race and racism. Although she certainly experienced America’s divisive racial climate, her multilayered work is rooted in the complex experience of her unique childhood. Williamson’s memories have inspired her to examine common themes of adolescence that transcend racial and gender boundaries. She states...

“I think of people of color as not confined or defined by our history. I see our history of resilience and perseverance as the inspiration that makes me want to paint and develop my own narratives. It’s a starting point for a multitude of possibilities to create stories that reach far beyond our recent history into a future full of possibilities.”¹

Williamson’s unique experiences inform the stories she tells. Much of her content is inspired by the 11 formative years she spent in a luxurious New York City home where her mother and father were live-in employees. Young Philomena was both embraced and valued by the wealthy and eccentric Greek family she lived with. The older teenage daughters treated her like their own living doll. In Williamson’s memory, the years she spent there were magical, filled with music, play acting, and lots of family drama. This unusual world of her youth continues to inspire her idiosyncratic compositions. However, her paintings are not fully realized narratives or illustrations of her past. They are fragments of memories and fantasies that form their own compelling yet destabilizing universe.

Long interested in dance and choreography, Williamson often starts her compositions with the gesture of a figure. These dynamic movements—frequently awkward, confused, or struggling—capture the spirit of an emotion. The painting then evolves around the gesture in a non-linear fashion. In her painting *Sweet*

Press Release

November 18th
December 30th, 2023

Opening
Saturday, November 18th
from 11am to 8pm

Dreams (2010), a young female figure is splayed on her back upending a teacup and spilling milk while her companion leans on a three-tiered cake stand. In this scenario, even the cupcakes are askew.

Williamson's canvases often challenge the viewer to resist the judgement that adults might impose on the figures and instead see their sensuality as part of the transitional and unstable nature of adolescence. Throughout her body of work figures of various hues, unspecified ages, and non-binary genders engage in physical interplay that often borders on the erotic. Her work raises essential questions. Is the taboo notion of adolescent sexuality part of her narrative? Or are these ideas a social construct? In works such as *Pink and White Honey* (2017), *Embroidered Dream* (2021), and *Here I Hold Becoming* (2020) the physicality of the figures' interactions hints a brewing adolescent sensuality.

In addition to the enigmatic figures that interact in Williamson's compositions, objects from her collection of vintage toys, dolls, children's clothing, and other decorative objects frequently appear as characters. Works such as *Dislocation and Stored Memory* (2020) depict dolls and toys in awkward poses involved in narratives that draw upon the caprices of memory. What stories do these toys tell? Williamson's adolescent characters are often depicted playing with toys, revealing the push and pull between childhood and adolescence. In *Red Buckled Shoe* (2014) a young girl holds a Topsy-Turvy doll that is black on one half and white on the other. A recurring character in Williamson's body of work, the Topsy-Turvy doll is a nineteenth-century American folk toy that drew on the power dynamics of race, slavery, and beauty in the nineteenth century. *Red Buckled Shoe*, awash in blue, calls to my mind Toni Morrison's poignant book *The Bluest Eye* (1970). Morrison examined how American standards of beauty that valued whiteness also fostered self-hatred and longing in young Black girls. Similarly, Williamson's figure and the doll enact the tensions of identity that might surface as we navigate our thoughts, dreams, and fears through play.

The dynamic compositions in Philemona Williamson's universe map the grey areas and opaque memories of adolescence in lush color and exuberant form. Her characters are wholly self-contained, offering open ended narratives and leaving more questions than answers. Although Williamson is a memory keeper, she understands its vagaries and allows her characters, both animate and inanimate, to keep their own secrets.

Dr. Adrienne L. Childs

Sources:

Susan J. Isaacs, Philemona Williamson, Holtzman MFA Gallery, Towson University, 2012

Arturo Lindsay, "Ashé in the Art of Philemona Williamson," In *The Beautiful Somewhere: The Art of Philemona Williamson*, The Robert and Sallie Brown Gallery and Museum, University of North Carolina, 2017

Gail Stavitsky, "Philemona Williamson: Metaphorical Narratives" in *Philemona Williamson: Metaphorical Narratives*, Montclair Art Museum, 2017

1. From the interview with the artist, June 29, 2023

-

Adrienne L. Childs is an independent scholar, art historian, and curator. She is adjunct curator at The Phillips Collection in Washington DC. She contributed to many exhibitions, including *The Colour of Anxiety: Race, Sexuality and Disorder in Victorian Sculpture* at The Henry Moore Institute in Leeds, England, or *Riffs and Relations: African American Artists and the European Modernist Tradition* at The Phillips Collection in 2020, or *The Black Figure in the European Imaginary* at The Cornell Fine Arts Museum at Rollins College in 2017.

Philemona Williamson

Crush on Crush, 2023

Huile sur toile

40,5 × 51 cm / 15 15/16 × 20 inches



Philemona Williamson

A Pause Requested, 2021

Huile sur toile

119 × 137 × 3,5 cm / 47 × 54 × 1 3/8 inches



Philemona Williamson

Here I Hold Becoming, 2020

Huile sur toile

122 × 152,5 × 3,5 cm / 48 × 60 1/16 × 1 3/8 inches

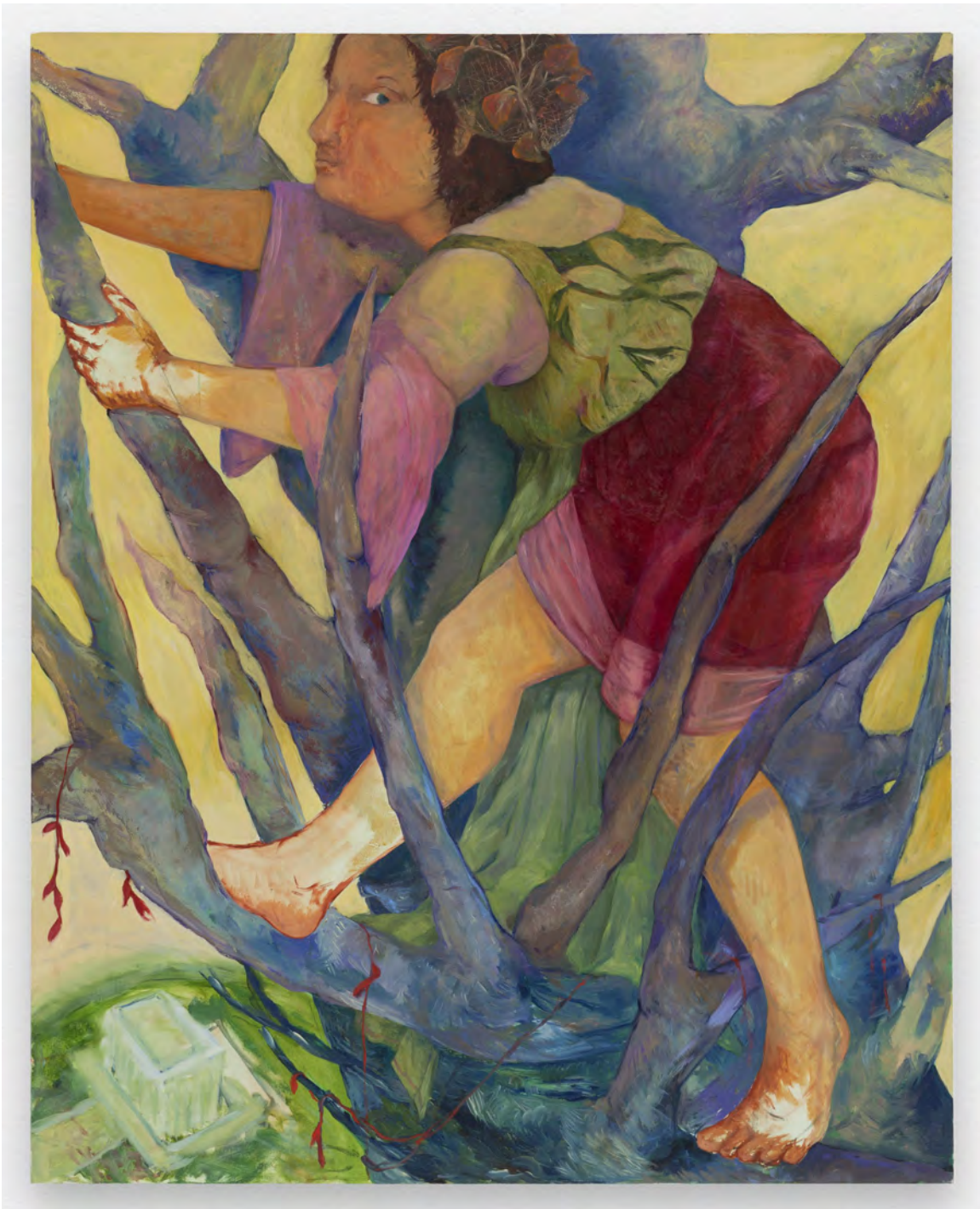


Philemona Williamson

A Contemplative Perch, 2017

Huile sur toile

152,5 × 122 × 3,5 cm / 60 1/16 × 48 × 1 3/8 inches



Philemona Williamson

Always Climbing, 2016

Huile sur toile

122 × 152,5 × 3,5 cm / 48 × 60 1/16 × 1 3/8 inches



Images HD / High Res
Images

Philemona Williamson

Téléchargements / Downloads
[HD / HR](#)
[BD / LR](#)



Philemona Williamson
Crush on Crush, 2023
Huile sur toile / Oil on canvas
-
Photo : A. Mole
Courtoisie Semiose, Paris

Téléchargements / Downloads
[HD / HR](#)
[BD / LR](#)



Philemona Williamson
A Contemplative Perch, 2017
Huile sur toile / Oil on linen
-
Photo : A. Mole
Courtoisie Semiose, Paris

Téléchargements / Downloads
[HD / HR](#)
[BD / LR](#)



Philemona Williamson
Portrait
-
Photo : Nina Subin
Courtesy Semiose, Paris

Téléchargements / Downloads
[HD / HR](#)
[BD / LR](#)



Philemona Williamson
Here I Hold Becoming, 2020
Huile sur toile / Oil on canvas
-
Photo : A. Mole
Courtoisie Semiose, Paris

Téléchargements / Downloads
[HD / HR](#)
[BD / LR](#)



Philemona Williamson
Always Climbing, 2016
Huile sur toile / Oil on linen
-
Photo : A. Mole
Courtoisie Semiose, Paris

Téléchargements / Downloads
[HD / HR](#)
[BD / LR](#)



Philemona Williamson
A Pause Requested, 2021
Huile sur toile / Oil on canvas
-
Photo : A. Mole
Courtoisie Semiose, Paris



CV / Résumé

Née en 1951 à New York (US)
Vit et travaille à Montclair (US)

Born in 1951 in New York (US)
Lives and works in Montclair (US)

Philemona Williamson

Expositions personnelles / Solo Exhibitions

2023

- *The Borders of Innocence*, Semiose, Paris (FR)

2022

- *Recent Paintings*, June Kelly Gallery, New York (US)

2021

- Jenkins Johnson Gallery, San Francisco (US)

2019

- Foreman Gallery of Contemporary Art, Hartwick College, Oneonta, New York (US)
- Drumthwacket Foundation (NJ Governor's Mansion), Princeton (US)

2017

- *Career Retrospective: Philemona Williamson: Metaphorical Narratives*, Montclair Art Museum, New Jersey (US)
- *Hovering Tales: Recent Paintings*, June Kelly Gallery, New York (US)
- *Philemona Williamson*, Stone Center for Black Culture & History, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, North Carolina (US)

2015

- *Black & Colored: Recent Paintings*, June Kelly Gallery, New York (US)

2013

- *Philemona Williamson: New Works*, Delaware Center for Contemporary Arts, Wilmington (US)

2012

- *Philemona Williamson*, Holtzman MFA Gallery, Towson University, Towson (US)

2010

- *Fractured Tales*, June Kelly Gallery, New York (US)

2009

- *Philemona Williamson Exhibition*, Delaware County Community College, Media, Pennsylvania (US)

2008

- *Philemona Williamson: Sudden Passages: New Paintings*, June Kelly Gallery, New York (US)

2006

- *New Paintings*, June Kelly Gallery, New York (US)

2003

- *New Paintings*, June Kelly Gallery, New York (US)

2001

- *Philemona Williamson*, Amelie A. Wallace Gallery, State Univ. of NY, College at Old Westbury, New York (US)

2000

- *New Paintings*, June Kelly Gallery, New York (US)

1999

- *Philemona Williamson...And What She Found There*, Kohler Arts Center, Sheboygan (US)

1998

- *Recent Paintings*, June Kelly Gallery, New York (US)

1995

- *New Paintings*, June Kelly Gallery, New York (US)

1994

- *Philemona Williamson: Fables and Fantasies*, Hypo-Bank, New York (US)

1993

- *Inaugural Exhibition*, Flushing Council on Culture & Arts, New York (US)
- *Selected Paintings*, Pennsylvania State University, University Park, Pennsylvania (US)

1992

- *New Paintings*, June Kelly Gallery, New York (US)
- *Powers Art Gallery*, East Stroudsburg University, Pennsylvania (US)

1991

- *Philemona Williamson Paintings*, African American Museum, Hempstead, New York (US)
- *Paintings*, June Kelly Gallery, New York (US)
- *Philemona Williamson: Through the Looking Glass*, Southampton College of LI Univ., New York (US)

1989

- *Philemona Williamson*, Wenger Gallery, Los Angeles, California (US)

1988

- *Philemona Williamson: Recent Paintings*, The Queens Museum of Art, Queens, New York (US)

Expositions collectives / Group Exhibitions

2023

- *Sins of the Fathers*, cur. Nat Meade, Taymour Grahne Projects, London (UK)
- *The Minotaur's Daydream*, Semiose, Paris (FR)
- *Je ne suis pas ce que tu vois de moi*, Fondation Francès, Clichy (FR)

2022

- *Body Burdens*, NYU Gallatin Galleries, New York (US)
- *Narrative Images: Wendell Jeffrey & Philemona Williamson*, RVCC Art Gallery, Branchburg, New Jersey (US)
- *The New Drawing Room*, MassArt x SoWa, Boston (US)
- *Claiming The Narrative*, The Visual Arts Center, Summit (US)

2021

- *Paradise Island*, Steven Harvey Fine Arts Projects, New York (US)
- *Podium II*, Gallery 181, San Francisco (US)

2020

- *Sit Still, Self-Portraits in the Age of Distraction*, Anna Zorina Gallery, New York (US)

2018

- *10 Years 10 Artists*, Octavia Art Gallery, New Orleans (US)
- *Serenading Summer*, June Kelly Gallery, New York (US)

2017

- *Converging Voices: Gender and Identity*, Hofstra, Long Island: Hofstra University Museum, New York (US)

2016

- *Selections from the Mott-Warsh Collection*, The Visual Arts Center, Summit (US)
- *Visions of our 44th President Barack Obama*, cur. Charles H Wright, Museum of African American History, Detroit (US)

2010

- *Shrew'd: Survey of American Woman Artists*, Sheldon Museum of Art, Lincoln (US)
- *American Celebrations of Childhood*, Hofstra University Museum, Hempstead (US)

2009

- *A Complex Weave: Women and Identity in Contemporary Art*, Rutgers-Camden Center, Rutgers University, Camden (US)

2007

- *Crossing the Line: African American Artists in the Jacqueline Bradley and Clarence Otis, Jr. Collection*, Cornell Fine Arts Museum, Winter Park (US)

2005

- *Five Contemporary Voices in A New Space*, Delta Arts Center, Winston-Salem (US)

2004

- *A Universe of Art, organized by Corporate Art Directions*, Credit Suisse First Boston (US)
- *Unveiling the Image: Multicultural Women Artists*, Visual Arts Center of New Jersey, Summit (US)

2003

- *Growing Up: Childhood in American and Native American Art*, Montclair Art Museum, Montclair (US)

2000

- *Collector's Choice II*, Orlando Museum of Art, Orlando (US)

1999

- *Drawing in the Present Tense*, Aronson Gallery, Parsons School of Design, New York (US)

1998

- *Postcards from Black America*, Center for Contemporary Art in Breda, and the Frans Hals Museum, Haarlem (NL)
- *Walk the Walk: Mentoring Youth in Art*, Forum for Contemporary Art, St. Louis (US)

1997

- *Women In Full Effect*, RUSH Philanthropic Art Foundation, New York (US)

1996

- *Bearing Witness: Contemporary Works by African American Women Artists*, traveling exhibition, Spelman College Museum of Fine Art, Atlanta (US)
- *Real: Figurative Narratives in Contemporary African-American Art*, Bass Museum of Art, Miami Beach (US)
- *The Boat, Object and Metaphor*, Pratt Manhattan Gallery, and the Rubelle and Norman Schafler Gallery, Pratt Institute, Brooklyn (US)

1994

- *Current Identities: Recent Paintings in the United States*, 1994 Cuenca International Bienal of Painting, Ecuador, Aljira Center for Contemporary Art, Newark (US)

1992

- *Present Tense*, UWM Fine Arts Gallery, The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Milwaukee (US)

1988

- *Alice And Look Who Else Through the Looking Glass*, Bernice Steinbaum Gallery, New York (US)

Commandes publiques et privées / Public and Private Commissions

2020

- Childrens' book illustrations "Lubaya's Quiet Roar" Penguin Random House

2016

- Poetry in Motion, MTA Arts & Design, New York (US)

2015

- Visions of Our 44th President Barack Obama, bust, Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History, Detroit, Michigan (US)

2007

- Seasons, six fused-glass panels, commissioned by the MTA Arts & Design, Livonia Avenue MTA Station, Brooklyn, New York (US)

2004

- Folktales From Around the World, four glass mosaic murals, New York State School Construction Authority and the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs Percent for Art Program, New York (US)

1999

- Art in Embassy Program, US State Department, Madagascar (MG)

Collections publiques / Public Collections

- Montclair Art Museum, Montclair (US)
- Kalamazoo Art Museum, Kalamazoo (US)
- Mint Museum of Art, Charlotte (US)
- Hampton University Museum, Hampton (US)
- Newark Museum, Newark (US)
- Sheldon Art Museum, University of Nebraska, Lincoln (US)

- Smith College Museum of Art, Northampton (US)
- Mott-Warsh Art Collection, Flint (US)
- Reader's Digest, Pleasantville, New York (US)
- AT&T, New Jersey (US)

Récompenses / Awards

2022

- Anonymous Was A Woman Grant, New York (US)

2022

- New Jersey State Council on the Arts Fellowship, New Jersey (US)

2015

- Artists-in-Residence Program, Joan Mitchell Center, New Orleans (US)

2008

- Bau Institute, Residency, Otranto, Italy (IT)

1997

- Joan Mitchell Foundation Award in Painting, New York (US)

1993-1994

- Ludwig Vogelstein Grant, New York (US)

1994

- MTA Arts & Design Poster Commission, Union Square Station, New York (US)

1991

- New York Foundation for the Arts, Fellowship in Painting, New York (US)

1989- 1990

- Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grant, New York (US)

1988

- AIM, The Bronx Museum of the Arts, New York Artists Space, Exhibition Grant, New York (US)

1987-1988

- National Endowment for the Arts, Fellowship in Painting, Washington (US)

1983

- The Millay Colony for the Arts, Artist-in-Residence, Austerlitz, New York (US)

Publications / Publications

Ouvrages monographiques / Monographs

- *Entangled in Truth*, cat. exp. (Jenkins Johnson Gallery, San Francisco, 2021), San Francisco, 2021.
- STAVITSKY, Gail, *Philemona Williamson: Metaphorical Narratives*, cat. exp. (Montclair Art Museum, Montclair, 2017), BookMobile, Montclair, 2017.
- *Philemona Williamson: New Work, Center for the Arts*, cat. exp. (Holtzman Gallery, Townson University, Townson, 2012), Townson, 2012.
- *New Paintings*, cat. exp. (June Kelly Gallery, New York, 2003), New York, 2003.
- *Philemona Williamson: Fables and Fantasies*, cat. exp. (Hypo-Bank, New York, 1994), New York, 1994.

Ouvrages collectifs / Collective Books

- CHAVCHAVADZE Sasha, MCFARLAND Joanne, *SALLY... An Interdisciplinary Exhibition*, cat. exp. (The Old Stone House & Washington Park Artpoetica Project Space The Gowanus Dredgers Boathouse, Brooklyn, 2020), Brooklyn, 2020.
- *Shrew'd: The Smart and Sassy Survey of American Women Artists*, cat. exp. (Sheldon Museum of Art, Lincoln, 2010), Lincoln, 2010.
- *Children's Pleasures: American Celebrations of Childhood*, cat. exp. (Hofstra University Museum, Hempstead, 2010), Hempstead, 2010.
- ISAACS, Susan, ROSENBERG, Martin, *A Complex Weave: Women and Identity in Contemporary Art*, cat. exp. (Rutgers University, New Jersey, 2009), Rutgers, New Jersey, 2009.
- E. RAY, Carina, *Crossing the Line: African American Artists in the Jacqueline Bradley and Clarence Otis*, cat. exp. (Jr. Collection, Cornell Fine Arts Museum, Winter Park, 2007), Ohio University Press, Winter Park, 2007.
- *Unveiling the Image: Multicultural Women Artists*, cat. exp. (New Jersey Center for Visual Arts, Summit, 2004), Summit, 2004.
- *Collector's Choice II: Contemporary Art from Central Florida Collections*, cat. exp. (Orlando Museum of Art, Orlando, 2000), Orlando, 2000.
- *Drawing in the Present Tense*, cat. exp. (Arnold and Sheila Aronson Gallery, Parsons School of Design, New York, 1999), New York, 1999.
- *Postcards from Black America*, cat. exp. (Center for Contemporary Art in Breda, Netherlands, and the Frans Hals Museum, Haarlem, 1998), Haarlem, 1998.
- *Bearing Witness: Contemporary Works by African American Women Artists*, cat. exp. (Ulrich Museum of Art, Wichita, 1996), Wichita, 1996.

**Revue de presse (sélection) / Press Review
(selection)**

- ROBERT, Henri, "Take a fresh look at 2023 through the eyes of eight artists", *Art Basel*, October 13th, 2023, online.
- SANCHEZ, Anne-Cécile, "Galeries françaises : coup de projecteur sur les artistes femmes", *Le Journal des Arts*, October 6-19th, 2023, p. 4.
- AMO, Julie, "On a aimé : The Minotaur's Daydream à la galerie Semiose", *The Steidz*, March 5th, 2023, online.
- JACKSON, Ayana, "Philemona Williamson" *Killens Review of Arts & Letters*, Fall/Winter 2022/2023, p. 40.
- "Anonymous Was a Woman announces \$ 375,000 in grants", *Artforum*, November 16th, 2022, online.
- MAUNEY, Claire Anna, "11 Contemporary Black Artists You Should Know", *Art & Object*, March 1st, 2022, online.
- LA GORCE, Tammy, "Painter Philemona Williamson Colorfully Depicts Adolescents", *New Jersey Monthly*, March 5th, 2019, online.
- DANIEL, Daria, "artnet Asks: Philemona Williamson, Emotive Painter", *Artnet*, March 3rd, 2015, online.

Contact

Philippe Fouchard Filippi

Fouchard Filippi Communications

phff@fouchardfilippi.com

+33 (0) 1 53 28 87 53

+33 (0) 6 60 21 11 94

Antoine Diot

Communication & Online Sales / Semiose

a.diot@semiose.com

+33 (0) 9 79 26 16 38

+33 (0) 7 88 72 13 77