



Robin F. Williams, *Cold Brew* (2018).  
Acrylic and oil on panel, 40 × 30 inches.  
Image courtesy of the artist and  
Various Small Fires, Los Angeles/Seoul.

# Instagram STARTists and Bad Painting

I first saw Robin F. Williams' paintings on Instagram. I assume most of us did since she has 75.6K followers—you might say she's an Instagram STARTist. Her paintings have been so successful on Instagram that she epitomizes a growing group of rising art stars whose Instagram stardom compounds their art world success. As digital images backlit on a phone, Williams' work is strikingly graphic. But upon seeing the work in person at her solo show at Various Small Fires this fall, it became more clear how her physical and material painting methods ultimately serve her graphic images and how these techniques break all the established, historically developed codes of "good" painting.

Williams uses acrylic—that bold, plastic-based paint—masking off the majority of her shapes to paint thin layers of color within sharp, precise forms. She uses thicker, brushier techniques in the backgrounds, but rather than an expressionist impasto she implements systematic, swirling strokes or waves of paint like those typically used in wall treatments. Elsewhere, squiggly little painted lines illustrate individual pubic hairs, and scraped away gradations of color are used to indicate the chiaroscuro of rounded body parts. Together, these techniques break from many of the assorted traditions of "good" painting first developed during the Renaissance, revised during the reign of the Salon

of the Académie des Beaux-Arts, and upended during subsequent avant-garde movements. In my own art education, I was offered an atemporal grab-bag of painting codes: Renaissance composition; the Impressionist's moratorium on black paint; Abstract Expressionist expectations for deeply felt color choices and paint handling; and a lingering Beaux-Arts idea that painting must start from a foundation of observed drawing. Rather than following these inherited techniques, Williams uses acrylic instead of oil, cartoony/illustrative figuration rather than closely observed realism, and systematic rather than expressionistic brushwork.

Her paintings could be seen as following the tradition of "bad" painting which became an official designation of museum-worthy art in a 1978 exhibition curated by Marcia Tucker at the New Museum, titled simply *"Bad" Painting*. As Tucker wrote in the show's catalogue, the exhibition included figurative work that "defies, either deliberately or by virtue of disinterest, the classic canons of good taste."<sup>1</sup> At the time, the ruling taste tended toward minimalism and conceptualism, and frequent proclamations about the death of painting peppered contemporary art discourse. As a result, simply the act of painting at all—not to mention painting figures—seemed an act of rebellion. In the 1980s, artists like Julian Schnabel and Martin Kippenberger found incredible market success in taking up the mantle of "bad" painting, making intentionally awkward figurative work. From the 1990s into the 2000s, other successful "bad" figure painters like Lisa Yuskavage and John Currin referenced art historical figures in their work alongside cartoons and soft-core pornography.

At this point, 40 years after Tucker's *"Bad" Painting* exhibition, I'm not sure if we collectively remember what should be considered good and what should be considered bad in painting. Has good become bad, and bad good, and back again? Where are we in the cycle? Given the institutional and market aggrandizement of "bad"

1. Marcia Tucker, *"Bad" Painting* (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1978).

painting, Williams' arsenal of "bad" painting techniques do not seem to be rebelling deliberately against any lingering standards. Yet unlike the "bad" painters Tucker sought out, she follows rather than avoids current tastes and fashions. Being *au courant* is, in a way, her specialty. Her subject matter and precise, graphic painting techniques seem chosen purely to make the imagery look as eye-catching as possible on digital platforms. The paintings photograph well, they communicate clearly in thumbnails or blown up, and they burn into your memory as icons.

Williams' Instagram page is almost entirely made up of pictures of her paintings—no hot selfies or pictures flaunting a cool lifestyle—so the strength of these images alone has drawn her followers. The boldness of her images comes from her graphic techniques as well as from her recasting of iconic imagery from art history, advertising, and contemporary culture. Her nude, athletically posed white people in the VSF show have rounded, strong limbs reminiscent of Nazi and Soviet Socialist Realist sculptures. For instance, the central figure in her painting *Alive with Pleasure* (2019) conjures an upside-down version of Arno Breker's 1939 sculpture *Die Partei*, a male nude meant to represent the Third Reich that stood outside the German Chancellery.

However, unlike the Socialist figures that boldly stare into an idealized future, Williams' figures have cartoonishly large smiles or comically blank, straight faces that belie their propagandistic status as examples of ideal, or idealizing, citizens. Williams uses her illustrative style to reenact scenes that suggest past ideological orders, but her style and her dissimulating figures dissociate from any embedded message. They pose appropriately for the scene, but their facial expressions show that they either enjoy themselves too much (as in the overly-broad smile in *Ice Queen*, 2019) or refuse to pretend they are enjoying themselves at all (like the blank-faced gymnast in *Weathervane*, 2018). Their expressions bring cheekiness into the work that

contrasts the serious stylistic references of their bodies—their eyes are simplified, half-circles, and their grins have the look of Adobe Illustrator drawings.

In the smaller portraits in the show, her subject matter looks more straight forwardly contemporary, and the figures' poses more closely reference those you would see in advertising. The titles of the works, all of which have the ring of hashtags, point to youth culture accouterments and expressions: *Side Eye in Tie Dye*, *Slow Clap*, *Ice Queen*, *Vaping in the Rain*, and *Cold Brew*. Williams' work stays very close to the world in which it thrives. (To understand how mainstream her references are, #vaping, for instance, has 9 million posts on Instagram, #coldbrew has 1.6 million, and #icequeen has 353K.) Being not just on Instagram but of Instagram allies the paintings with signifiers of new, online frontiers of commerce and advertising. Just as influencers sway our desires and purchases, the art we see trending on Instagram can affect our aesthetic tastes and shape our assessment of what art is important now. Instagram STArtists like Robin F. Williams (as well as Devan Shimoyama, Shona McAndrew, or Chloe Wise—to name a few other popular figurative painters), are both influencers and artistic influences to young artists.

Historically, artists living in close proximity have created movements by communally developing ideas and formal innovations through conversation and by challenging each other to push visual ideas further. The Abstract Expressionists, for example, lived mostly between 8th and 10th Street in Manhattan. They regularly dropped into each other's studios to watch the progression of ideas, and famously convened at bars at night to discuss their work. Today's art world has grown exponentially. It has spread out geographically. We access its scope, as everything else, through the internet. Seeing work online, rather than in person, can give a broad idea of what artists are creating around the world, but it gives little indication of the context in which it was created, the discourse



Above: Marcia Tucker and a guest at the opening of *"Bad" Painting* (1978). Image courtesy of the artists and New Museum, New York. Photo: New Museum.

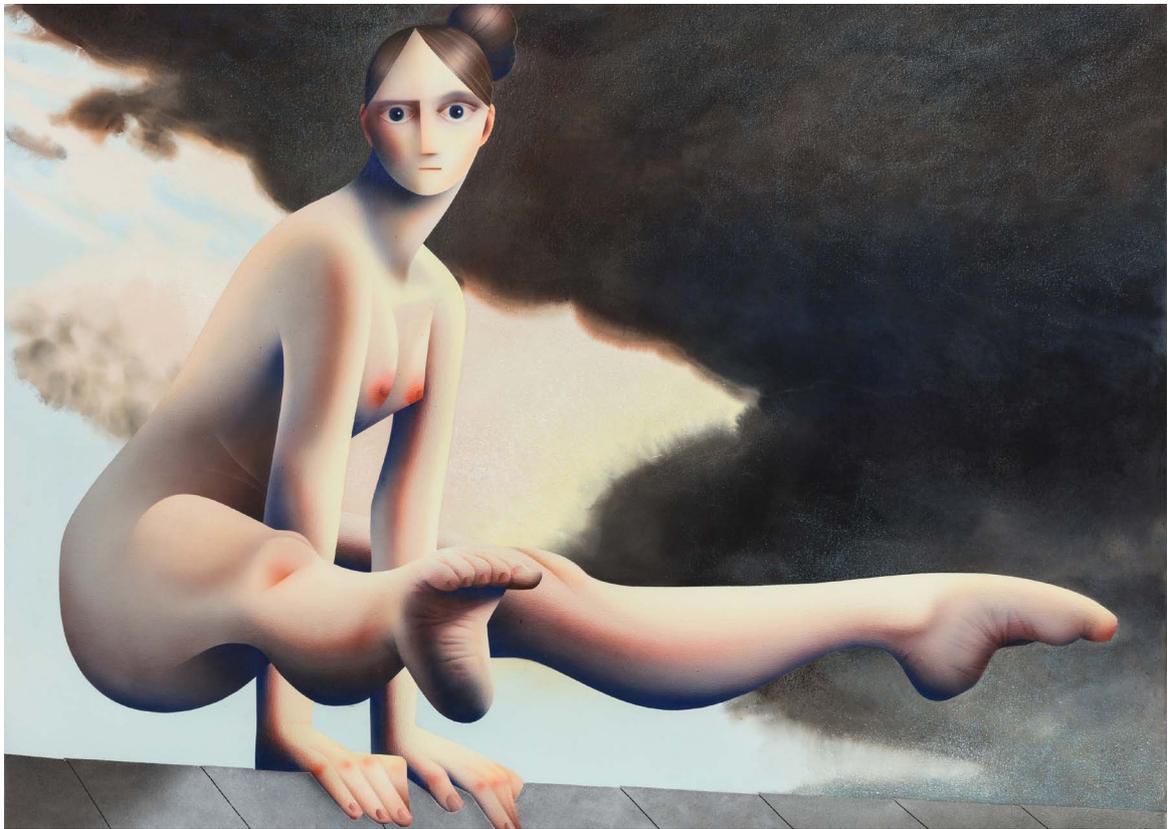
Below: *"Bad" Painting* (installation view) (1978). Image courtesy of the artists and New Museum, New York. Photo: Thomas Haar.

surrounding the work, or the development of works over time (the popularity of artists posting photos of works in progress, #wip—16.9 million posts—notwithstanding).

Instagram's interface especially privileges singular, decontextualized images. Scrolling through my feed, I might see a picture of a cat, an ad for a bra, a painting, and then a photo of my friend's kid. If the painting doesn't grab my attention in a fraction of a second, it will soon be lost within the algorithm's constantly updating array of images. In contrast to seeing a digital photograph of a painting in the melee of my Instagram feed, when seeing a painting in person, I can physically move around it, get up close to analyze how it's made, and stare at it for any chosen amount of time. Painting can draw you in to reveal itself slowly as a physical embodiment of the artist's methods and thought processes during its creation.

To be popular, Instagram STARTists' work must live up to the demands of the platform: quickly attract a viewer's attention, communicate clearly as a self-contained image, and be instantaneously accessible to a large audience. The pictures, videos, and stories that we put online are called "content," what Urban Dictionary defines as "the shit that people post online for maximum views." It's surprising that given the overwhelming amount of online "content" we produce, just how little real content (as it is understood in any Jr. High English class), we provide. Though, if the medium (Instagram) is the message, we are right on topic. When we post paintings on Instagram, the content of our work risks taking on the pressure to operate similarly to the kind of content that aims only for maximum views. Instagram, of course, has its own interests in keeping users' attention. In the era of Instagram STARTists, the criteria by which we evaluate painting—whether good or bad—can collide with how we gauge a successful post.

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Above: Robin F. Williams, *Weathervane* (2018).  
Acrylic and oil on canvas, 60 x 76 inches.  
Image courtesy of the artist and Various Small Fires,  
Los Angeles/Seoul.

Below: Robin F. Williams, *Vaping in the Rain* (2019).  
Acrylic and oil on canvas, 54 x 70 inches.  
Image courtesy of the artist and Various Small Fires,  
Los Angeles/Seoul.