



STEPHANIE J. WILLIAMS:
THINGS THAT DON'T HAVE NAMES

April 23–June 22, 2019

Languid Objects Animated

By Lily Siegel

Executive Director and Curator

Who? What? Where? When? Why? How? These five W's and one H (5w1H), are a useful starting place for anyone trying to gather information to tell a story. When applied to personhood, as Stephanie J. Williams does, they take on an awkwardness and an urgency. Through her work, Williams responds to these questions, not with clear answers but with humor, sensitivity, playfulness, seriousness, and complication. An artist, by nature of their public persona, is always opening themselves to scrutiny, always offering answers to these questions.

There is an oversized stuffed organ hanging from the ceiling and rotating slowly. It is a spinning disco ball; a hunk of meat on a spit; a churning stomach. The answer to the question, "What are you?"—a question Williams acknowledges she has been asked more than once, many times over in fact—is never straightforward. In this exhibition, Williams offers an oblique invitation to the viewer to diagram out a definition of self. A churning stomach can be a symptom of many things but perhaps the first that come to mind are distress and disgust. Distress and disgust at being scrutinized, questioned, questioned again, at the thought of eating something weird, not being able to categorize things, not knowing how to answer who you are, what you are, where you are, when you are, why you are, or how you are. The anxiety would be overwhelming if Williams were not so good-humored. The stomach is as soft as a pillow and Pepto-Bismol pink, it is adorned with a tutu of tulle/small intestine as it proudly pirouettes centerstage alongside a chorus of entangled tube socks huddled at the edge of the stage.

Williams had a Filipino, African American, and Catholic upbringing in Northern Virginia. She attended Catholic school in Washington, DC, and came home to the family's





Christmas tree farm. This exhibition is about her but it is also about, as the artist herself states, “not only the ‘untruth’ of perceived and constructed cultural contexts, but also consider[s] through anecdote and interview, the ‘corrective tactics’ used over generations by marginalized communities to teach ourselves about American identity”.¹ Over the years, the artist has built a lexicon of visual morphemes, pitches, and syllables that can be configured and reconfigured to form cohesive bodies (of work). She takes these pieces, made of yet smaller parts—fabric remnants, cheap and bulk found materials—to create the semblance of a larger organism that continues to remain nameless despite its uncanny familiarity. There are body parts, food parts, parts of clothing, glimpses of the locker room and the clubhouse, parts of you, parts of me, and parts of her.

There are elements that are repeated throughout the installation. The aforementioned tube socks are meticulously carved pieces of framing lumber that originally appeared in the artist’s oeuvre as a work entitled *Gym Joy* (2017), though the referent of the sock was already present in much earlier work. The hardness of the wood is mediated by the soft curves carved by the artist and the suggestion of the familiar comfort of the sock. The whites are crisp, and the colors of the stripes are bold.

The apex of a work from 2016, *Petitionary Prayer*, appears in this exhibition now placed directly on the ground. It is difficult to decipher what is happening—is a body bent in prayer, two bodies engaged in a lewd act, a figure bowed in reverence or shame? What is unmistakable is the pleated plaid skirt almost universally recognized as that from a Catholic schoolgirls’ uniform. Tube socks are often part of a uniform first donned in adolescence too. Dress and uniform are a common “corrective tactic” used by the marginalized to perform within a specific cultural context and to cover bodies that may be seen as different.

¹ Email from the artist on April 3, 2019

Bodies come in different shapes, sizes, colors, and textures yet are still more or less comprised of the same parts. Every body has sphincters, follicles, digestive tracts, a vascular system, sex organs, muscle, fat, and so much more. These are the parts that Williams has disassembled and catalogued, representing no one and everyone.

Moving from the realm of the mundane and corporeal to that of the glorified, Williams's pays homage to the rarefied space of the trophy room. The walls are covered in green carpeting one might associate with the golf club, an emerald green that brings the course inside, cheap enough to be easily replaced when the tony members' cleats rip a pinpoint tear. The artist has made her own trophies using miniature craft store wood plaques and wooden dowels affixed to resemble a bird perch. Each trophy is painted white with the ubiquitous tube sock stripes adorning each post. A glistening tongue, or is it a phallus, works its way out from the top and around each one giving them distinct crude personalities in their uniformity.

The coda to the exhibition is a short animation that the artist made *in situ*. There is a strip of wiry white hair with follicles exposed running the length of the wall. In the video, the hairs furl and unfurl, quiver, dance around each other and with each other; they shoot erect and collapse prostrate. There is a single black hair that appears to embolden the others' actions. And in the final frames, all is still again.

The title of the exhibition comes from a quote in the novel *White is for the Witching* (2009) by Helen Oyeyemi. "Well. I know of witches who whistle at different pitches, calling things that don't have names." What are you? Williams conjures a Creature along the lines of Frankenstein that in the end, is as much you as me.







BIOGRAPHY

Stephanie J. Williams (b. 1981, Washington, DC; lives and works in Washington, DC, and Baltimore) received a MFA in sculpture from Rhode Island School of Design, Providence; a Sheridan Teaching Certificate from Brown University, Providence; and a BFA from James Madison University, Harrisonburg. She currently teaches animation at Maryland Institute College of Arts (MICA) and has participated in exhibitions at 'sindikit, Baltimore; IA&A at Hillyer, DC; The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York; and Delaware Contemporary, Wilmington; among others. Williams received a 2019 DC Commission on the Arts & Humanities Fellowship and is a 2019 Janet & Walter Sondheim Artscape Prize finalist.











EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

Things That Don't Have Names, 2019

Mixed media site-specific installation

Dimensions variable

Courtesy of the artist

PUBLIC PROGRAMMING

Opening Reception

April 27, 5–7pm

In Their Own Words: Stephanie Williams and Lily Siegel in conversation

May 4, 3pm

Creative Response

May 30 and June 20, 7pm

Meditation Workshop

June 13, 7pm

Artist-led Workshop

June 15, 1–3pm

Insights: Saisha Grayson and Stephanie Williams in conversation

June 22, 3pm

The mission of the Greater Reston Arts Center is to enrich community life by promoting involvement and excellence in contemporary visual arts.

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12001 Market Street, Suite 103 • Reston, VA 20190 • 703.471.9242

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