

Margaux Williamson

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Taking in the fifteen years of work in “Interiors,” the first career-spanning survey of the Toronto-based painter Margaux Williamson, one senses an uncanny presentiment of pandemic life and its rhythms. Glowing laptop screens, half-drunk glasses of water, ornate rugs, ruffled bedsheets, handwritten notes, and the occasional dog seem to appear and recede from focus, evoking the displacements of memory and the alternately comforting and claustrophobic weight of extended time spent at home. These upended domestic tableaux display, as Ben Lerner says in an accompanying text, the “unstable relations between horizontality and verticality.” In other words, there are temporal and perspectival shifts afoot that suggest the painter’s intimacy with the controlled chaos of her depicted environments. Below,

Williamson speaks about her show, on view at the McMichael Canadian Art Collection in Kleinburg, Ontario, through May 8.

THE WORD “ANARCHY” came up in a couple of the texts written for the exhibition, which surprised me, but also made sense. I find the world quite chaotic, and I have always struggled to see meaning. I do see it sometimes, in a kind of order or self-organization that comes out of debris. In that regard, household spaces and objects are compelling because they reflect both intention—of control or meaning—and chaos. When I begin a new painting, I’m never sure what the composition will be or what elements will get included. I find that paintings often impose their own rules. It’s pleasurable to keep adjusting and discover how things come together. If I don’t surprise myself, I don’t think a painting can be that interesting for anyone else.

The show includes work from a series that I began in 2016. I think I was a bit depressed back then. It felt like I’d become bored with my own imagination, so I started out by painting what was directly in front of me. One of the first paintings was *Table and Chair*, 2016, because those were objects I could readily see. I initially put windows behind the table, but then I realized there needed to be depth within the table and not outside; that was the only correction I made. The idea of finding depth in darkness and discovering what was on the table became more intriguing.

By 2019, I had a stronger idea of where the work was going. With the latest series, I painted in a much larger scale than I ever have before. In some ways, you could say that a bigger canvas means harder or more ambitious work; the added space let me explore time and perspective. When the gallery suggested we call the show “Interiors,” I hadn’t even realized that most of the paintings were of the indoors. It felt like I was painting time more than I was painting a particular object or room, if that makes any sense. If you saw the rooms in my house, I’m sure some of the aesthetics would seem familiar, but I wasn’t invested in representing *my* kitchen or *my* bedroom per se. None of the new paintings have people in them, but one includes a dog. I don’t know why, but animals seem to interact with the rules of time differently than humans.



Margaux Williamson, *Window*, 2017, oil on canvas, 63 x 90".

The pandemic meant that I didn't see the fully prepared show until the opening. It was a huge pleasure to come and see what the curator, Jessica Bradley, had envisioned. There were about twenty-four people there, and I was only allowed to invite three guests. In the end, the intimacy of a smaller group felt more manageable, almost like a wedding where my friends and I got to sit at the kids' table. I don't know if "introvert" is the right word, but I'm pretty quiet and not much of a performer, so it was nice to be amongst a smaller group.

I've been working for twenty years, but it's only been in the last ten years that I've started feeling like I know what I'm doing. When I started out, I don't think I realized how fundamentally abstract painting is—no matter if it's classified as abstract or representational. I find it helpful to see my work through other people's eyes. My friend Sheila Heti and I have worked together in the studio for years. Though we've directly collaborated in the past, we also work well doing our own thing at the same time. I find it interesting that you can experience a generous connection or synergy with somebody without talking. Or also just wasting time joking. Recently, we ended up hanging out in

a car for a few hours, on a trip down the street to pick up ice cream for someone else. I don't know how the time goes by but having chemistry with someone on so many different levels, and knowing they read your work in such depth, is very special. To me, one of the most exciting things about working is having brilliant peers and critics and curators speak to what you're trying to do. My biggest ambition is to be part of the conversation, so it's wonderful when that conversation feels more coherent.

— *As told to Esmé Hogeveen*