
Richard E. Williams

Lady Day



Gallery 1.1.1., School of Art
The University of Manitoba

From the Gospel
According to St. Luke:

The Annunciation

THE angel Gabriel was sent from God unto a city of Galilee, named Nazareth, to a virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary.

And the angel came in unto her, and said, Hail, thou that art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women.

And when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying, and cast in her mind what manner of salutation this should be.

And the angel said unto her, Fear not, Mary: for thou has found favour with God. And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name JESUS. He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest, and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David: and he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there shall be no end.

Then said Mary unto the angel, How shall this be, seeing I know not a man?

And the angel answered and said unto her, The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God.

And Mary said, Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word. And the angel departed from her.

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Winnipeg, Manitoba
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HISTORICALLY, religious art has been created to glorify, to educate, and to give spiritual insight. At times, it has also served to focus attention on the foibles of mankind or to direct attention to society's imperfections. The works of Richard Williams of the past year and one-half have to some degree been involved with all of the above, yet they incorporate ideas which are very much outside the popular tradition of what many in the western world are accustomed to consider as "religious art."

Certainly the religious aspect is there, and it is important, yet it is interwoven with issues of broader scope. First there is the matter of relevance. In all of this series, a major concern is to make the iconography, imagery and content relevant in a contemporary sense. Secondly, there is the issue of art history itself, as Williams draws upon and makes references to traditions of representation and formal approaches from both religious and secular art of the past several hundred years. These references are not mere eclecticism. They are entwined with the imagery in a complex statement that draws upon sources from religion, art, and contemporary life for its strength and substance. Thirdly, there is the power of formal relationships developed in an invisible support structure contributing to the strength and focus of the work. If one were never to have encountered the Christian religion and were totally unfamiliar with its teachings, the communication through design, form, line and colour would in itself convey a dramatic message about a significant human experience.

In subject matter, these works focus on the social and psychological dilemma in which a human being finds herself as the chosen mate of God. In stark contrast to the usual depiction of events such as the Annunciation as spiritual and otherworldly experiences, Williams deals with the more immediate human emotions embodied in this event, emotions described or alluded to in biblical accounts, yet rarely allowed to enter visual interpretations.

The first work in this series is the black and white drawing entitled *Annunciation II*, in which a dark figure huddled on the right, wrapped in a heavy garment, is approached by a winged figure emerging from a cubist-like space on the left. Even in this early piece, the concept of dualities appears, a concept which will surface in all of the later works of the

series. The movement is from the formative area on the left, separated from the lighter and more open centre section by a vertical division running the height of the paper, a division broken by the figure of the angel which extends to the centre of the page. The vertical division is repeated on the right, but with more emphasis and only a slight break in the barrier. The figure of the Virgin on the right exists in her protected enclave, startled, protecting herself, yet indicating some response, some degree of approachability. The space between is electrified by the tension of the design. Visual forces pull the viewer between the two, locked as they are in their separate worlds, one advancing, the other recoiling, yet both held firm by the boundaries that separate them, not so much from each other as from the uncertain space between. The shift in treatment of space from left to right moves the viewer from the immaterial to the real, from the spiritual to the physical. In between is the arena wherein will be played the drama of the Annunciation, and of the artist's later work in this series.

In the 1985 drawing *Witness*, the response of the Virgin to the angel has become more open, more accepting. The drama of the moment is heightened by the low vantage point, and the drawing dissolves into the space below as if it has been wiped away, or perhaps obscured by a shadowy spectator in the foreground. The overall feeling is fragile and quiet, owing to the softness of the brown and white pastel and the gentleness of the strokes. The emphasis is on the space between the two figures, a space punctuated by a small rectangular patch above centre containing the single word "WITNESS." The word seems to be a thought without substance, a concept still without form yet somehow shaping the encounter. It is also an intrusion by a starkly contemporary pictorial device into an otherwise comfortable traditional pictorial space, jarring us out of the relaxed reverie with which we might approach the familiar and expected and into a questioning of the relationships we project into the imagery before us.

In the drawing entitled *Shrine*, a close-up view of female genitalia is drawn realistically in coloured pencil and inscribed with words from the text of the Annunciation, words which are mostly unintelligible but give the impression of readability. The viewer is drawn toward the image by the desire to make

sense out of the written words and at the same time is repelled by the intimacy of the subject and the view. It is perhaps an analogy to the dilemma of the annunciation itself as a part of religious doctrine, embodying elements deemed to be divine as well as those seen to be human or even sinful—a contradiction that pushes and pulls at the believer and in many respects parallels the experiences of life in general. In the tug of this approach/avoidance conflict we encounter another face of the dualities bound up in the interaction between the human and the spiritual: that of human sexual response.

The choice of imagery and subtitle of this work underline the emphasis upon the humanness of the Virgin throughout this series. Her sexuality is, in a way, proof of her humanity, and it is in her humanity wherein lies the vulnerability that allows the mortal being to identify with her experiences.

The vulnerability of the Virgin is an important element in all of these works. The nature and degree of this vulnerability varies from work to work, and it is always tempered by a receptivity, perhaps even an aggressiveness on her part. It is nowhere more evident than in the painting *Person to Person* of 1985 where strong erotic overtones, both in the imagery and in the historical references contained in the formal treatment of the subject, act as a counterweight to the otherworldly, almost mystical qualities of other aspects of the imagery and formal relationships.

The reclining female figure is painted with a lushness that can only be described as provocative; and surrounded as she is with the accoutrements of our contemporary youth/gadget oriented society, she suggests a mixture of innocence and worldliness that is evidence of her humanness. This is in stark contrast to the saintliness of her future, as alluded to by the figure of the angel appearing at the left edge and the ambiguity of lights and reflections in the window behind her. She is not an "idealized" Virgin but a representation of a living, breathing contemporary woman. The treatment is closer to the nakedness of Manet's *Olympia* than to the idealized representations of much of the history of the depiction of the Virgin in art. The contemporary references in the imagery locate the spectator in time and lead to the direct involvement of the viewer, as if in an immediate situation, putting the viewer in the picture in much the same way that Manet did.

A magazine labeled *Genesis* carries a dual reference, first to the contemporary rock group of that name and second to the biblical account of the creation, a reference to the concept of the Virgin Mary as the second Eve.

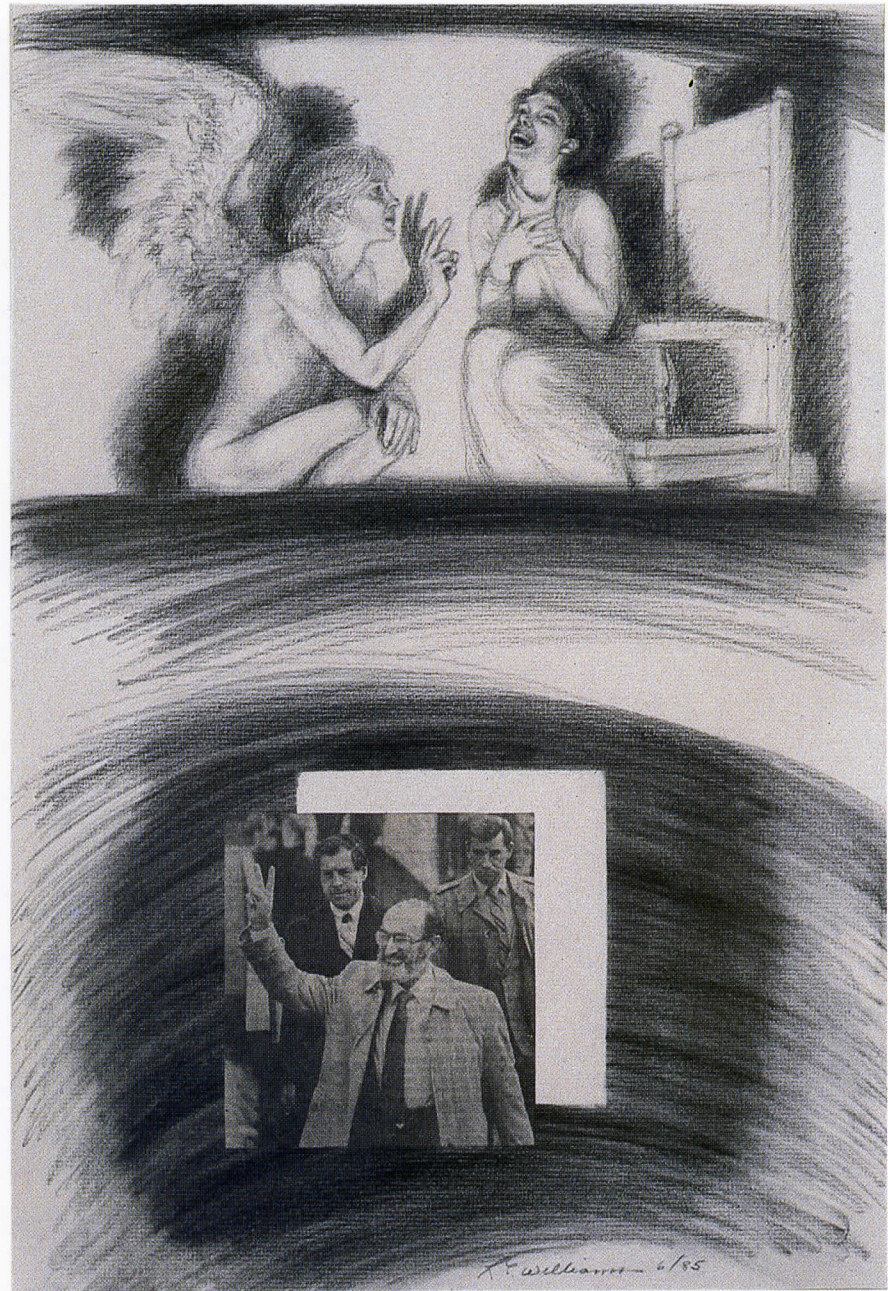
Williams describes his historical references for this painting as Manet's *Olympia* and Velasquez's painting of Venus. The references are there, in the position of the nude and the figure with the robe, although the dog at the foot of the couch is related to a Titian painting. These references serve to emphasize the earthliness of the woman, but they also refer to the traditions of representation of the female in Western art, that of an idealized sexual object, sometimes a goddess, sometimes a prostitute, yet always embodying elements of the noble and the base of human emotions. It is perhaps the depth of these allusions in this painting which makes the statement particularly poignant. It is a statement of a turning point, a change of a monumental nature. In a reversal of biblical history, the Eve who fell from innocence in the garden will be revived in the Virgin whose faith and absolute innocence brings a second chance to mankind.

Finally, in assessing the achievements of this series, it is important to note that, although artists have made the horror of Christ's death common currency in modern art, it is most uncommon for an artist to attempt the perhaps impossible task of making the "miracle" of his conception current. Williams has taken up this challenge. His avowed purpose is to make the Annunciation "both sensible as an article of faith and metaphoric as an inner condition of our modern lives." In attempting to do so, he draws upon a wealth of traditions in Western art and religion. Even the concept of the eroticism of the Virgin can be observed in such early writings as the 12th century homilies of Bernard of Clairvaux. Williams' originality, however, and the true success of his work, lies in his ability to synthesize these and contemporary elements into paintings and drawings which speak profoundly of our struggles to reconcile seeming contradictions between aspects of our physical and spiritual beings, and of the down-to-earth humanness possible in religious teachings.



Bob Tailbot

Annunciation II, 1984, 22¼" x 30".



R. E. Williams

Good News/Good News, 1985, 12" x 18".



R. E. Williams

Love Letter, 1985, 22½" x 29¾".



R. E. Williams

Witness, 1985, 20" x 32".



Bob Talbot

Annunciation With Text, 1984, 22 3/8" x 29 3/4".



R. E. Williams

Shrine (*Ostentatio Genitalium*), 1985, 8½" x 9".



Bob Talbot

Person to Person, 1985, 48" x 72".

Biography

RICHARD WILLIAMS was born in Dormont, Pennsylvania in 1921 and became a Canadian citizen in 1969. He studied sculpture at the Carnegie Institute of Technology and printmaking at the State University of Iowa. He taught at the Georgia State College for Women before coming to the University of Manitoba in 1954 as Director of the School of Art, a position that he held for almost twenty years. During much of that time he taught printmaking and lectured in art history. More recently he has been teaching drawing and design. Williams has exhibited in most of the major cities in Canada and the United States, and his work is in many private and public collections. This is his second one-man show in Winnipeg.

Works in Exhibition

1. Annunciation II, 1984, Conté crayon on gesso coated paper, 22¼" x 30".
2. Annunciation with Red Angel, 1984, Watercolor and conté crayon on paper, 12½" x 15".
3. Annunciation with Text, 1984, Conté crayon on paper, 22¾" x 29¾".
4. Views of Paradise, 1985, Pastel on paper, 9½" x 12½".
5. Hi, Good Lookin', 1985, Pastel on paper, 9½" x 12½".
6. Love Letter, 1985, Conté crayon on paper, 22½" x 29¾".
7. Witness, 1985, Conté crayon on paper, 20" x 32".
8. Mary's Comet, 1985, Pastel on paper, 41" x 58½".
9. Shrine (*Ostentatio Genitalium*), 1985, Conté crayon on paper, 8½" x 9".
10. Study for Person to Person, 1985, Acrylic on Paper, 12" x 17½".
11. Good News/Good News, 1985, Carbon pencil and collage on paper, 12" x 18".
12. Person to Person, 1985, Oil on canvas, 48" x 72".

And

12 Studies, 1984-1985,
Carbon pencil on paper, 9½" x 12½".

Acknowledgements

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Credits

EXHIBITION CURATOR:
Dale Amundson

EXHIBITION INSTALLATION:
Zared Mann

CATALOGUE DESIGN:
Leo Simoens

CATALOGUE PHOTOGRAPHY:
Bob Talbot and R. E. Williams

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