

Amanda Williams

CHICAGO WORKS

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*Ultrasheen, (Winter, Overall), 2014, Color photograph;
13 1/4 x 20 in. Courtesy of the artist.*



Flamin' Red Hots from *Color(ed) Theory Suite*, 2014–15. Color photograph; 13 1/2 x 20 in. 1 of 7 images, boxed suite, edition of 10, aside from 2 artist's proofs. Courtesy of the artist and McCormick Gallery.

It's a Goldmine/Is the Gold Mine?, 2016. Imitation gold metal leaf on salvaged Chicago brick; Overall dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist and McCormick Gallery.

An artist who trained as an architect, Amanda Williams (b. 1974) transforms materials through unexpected juxtapositions of color and form. She reworks everyday objects small and large, ranging from bricks and hair products to buildings, land parcels, and streets. Her multidisciplinary practice is roving and referential, and like the bricks she leafs in gold, is layered with connections to Chicago's South Side, histories of housing inequity, and African American popular culture. These references are seamlessly woven into her sculptures, paintings, and works on paper, and lead viewers to think more deeply about the relationships between material value, urban space, and race.

Williams earned her degree in architecture at Cornell University, where she was deeply influenced by architectural historian Colin Rowe, among others. Rowe's work on urban space called for a sustained consideration of cities and their histories. Skeptical of modern architecture that isolated buildings from a larger context, he advocated for eclectic cities that respond to local histories. This sensibility is at the core of how Williams understands the relationships between architecture and race in urban environments.

Williams's approach offers an essential contribution to the field of architecture, which has suffered from a lack of diversity. Although architecture as a discipline may seem like a rarefied intellectual arena, the choices architects make shape nearly every aspect of social experience; an architect's work, whether a building or urban plan, is ultimately designed for people. The fact that less than a fraction of a percent of working architects are African American women reflects the complex relationships between race, gender, and urban planning. Although Williams is deeply invested in expanding the field of architecture to include a more diverse set of experiences, she has ultimately chosen to make art using the tools and products of the architect: maps, construction materials, and at times, buildings themselves. For Williams, making art allows for a more open-ended engagement with the world, enabling her to comment on and respond to the built environment.

Color is an essential aspect of the visual narratives Williams creates, not simply as a formal element but as a link to everyday objects and their cultural associations. For example, in *Color(ed) Theory* (2014–15), the project for which she is perhaps best known, Williams applied bold colors to the built environment of Chicago's South Side. She developed a palette of eight colors based on hues she identified in African American consumer culture, including Flamin' Red Hots, Ultrasheen, Luster's Pink Oil, and Crown Royal Bag. She used the colors to paint eight unoccupied houses in Englewood, which were on the city's demolition list, and then photographed them in situ. The project is simultaneously a formal study of the effects of light and shifts in scale on color, as well as a politically charged gesture. These colors are typically seen on small, handheld items, so there is an element of wonder and spectacle in seeing them on an object as big as a house. At the same time, by transforming houses slated for demolition, Williams drew attention to their vacancy and the neighborhood's urban blight. Her project also rekindled conversation about Chicago's history of discriminatory housing policies such as redlining that were intended to prevent black people from purchasing homes.¹ Williams's project creates a new narrative and conversation around this issue.

Color(ed) Theory thus addresses what demolition says about the history and future of cities. As architect and writer Keller Easterling has argued, alternative possibilities for space and materials emerge if we think

about demolition differently—as an essential counterpart to construction.² Yet it is almost impossible to separate the logic of demolition from value judgments: a building or structure disappeared *because* some entity deemed it was not worth keeping and that something more valuable could take its place. Furthermore, the forces or institutions that influence the worth of a house, a neighborhood, or the land it is on, are often unknown to many of us, and are often rooted in historical legacies. The series draws attention to the racial undertones of discussions about urban decay, as well as to the histories that have led to vacancy and demolition.



Installation view of
Gordon Matta-Clark's
*Circus: The Caribbean
Orange*, MCA Chicago
Jan 28–Feb 13, 1978
Photo: © MCA Chicago.

In *Color(ed) Theory*, Williams built on the work of another Cornell architecture alum, Gordon Matta-Clark, who turned buildings into sculptures through a process of subtraction. Not incidentally, Matta-Clark's artistic legacy is connected with the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago: his work *Circus: The Caribbean Orange* (1978) was an intervention on the MCA's building, which was being renovated for gallery space.³ Matta-Clark cut a series of circles into the building and created a prescribed walking path from which visitors could see into and through the space in a way that would otherwise have been impossible. As art critic Susan Snodgrass has observed, Williams's and Matta-Clark's work share a lineage of urban archaeology: "Matta-Clark's overall practice expanded the parameters of both architecture and sculpture . . . His cuts and splices destabilized the physical, structural foundations of the buildings that were his chosen medium and, through unexpected, metaphoric plays of light, exposed or revealed the hidden social and economic systems that govern property ownership, particularly in cities."⁴ Like Matta-Clark's work, Williams's interventions highlight the dynamics of property ownership and vacancy in the neighborhood of Englewood as a microcosm for problems affecting Chicago's South and West Sides more broadly.

For her *Chicago Works* exhibition, Williams expands on her critique of urban space in new bodies of work. Using common materials and architectural strategies, Williams transforms objects such as bricks and walls to prompt visual pleasure and intrigue as well as create space for conversations about spatial justice. Flashes of color throughout the gallery draw attention to easily overlooked architectural details, such as the grout between tiles. Williams uses gold as both a color and a precious metal, while recognizing a variety of social and political associations the material has accrued. *It's a Goldmine/Is the Gold Mine?* (2016) is composed of bricks

from a demolished house in Englewood that the artist leafed with imitation gold and placed on a handcrafted pallet. By gilding the bricks, Williams added value to the humble building material, exposing how the valuation of the bricks depends on whether they are part of a house or a commodity sold as construction material after the house has been demolished. The sculpture emphasizes the idea that monetary worth is inherent to both the land and the building materials of a neighborhood but can be difficult to access by the people who live there.

Two site-specific works created for the exhibition expand on the connection between value and access raised in *It's a Goldmine/Is the Gold Mine?* As the catchy title suggests, *She's Mighty Mighty, Just Lettin' It All Hang Out* (2017) is a wall composed of golden brick that blocks one of the gallery entrances. In *A Dream or Substance, a Beamer, a Necklace or Freedom?* (2017), Williams approached the issue differently. She built a small room within the gallery, with the same proportions as a standard Chicago lot, and invited South Side collaborators to help gild it in imitation gold leaf before sealing it off, leaving just a small gap for visitors to view the gleaming interior. By inviting Englewood residents to enter the room and create the work but denying entry to the MCA's general public, Williams shifted the expectation of museum access.

Her work also takes into account this history of the "gold standard," the monetary system that sets the worth of paper currency according to a fixed quantity of gold. The United States abandoned the gold standard in 1971 in favor of currency backed by "full faith and credit" of the government—essentially, a pact of mutual trust in which we all participate. Williams calls attention to the limits and disillusionments of mutual public trust through works that explore issues of access to property. Finally, Williams's works prompt us to reconsider if the bricks now have value as part of an artwork on view in a museum. If so, what does that say about each of those spaces? And how are we complicit in this creation of value?



Still from *The Wiz*, 1978.
Directed by Sidney Lumet;
Universal Studios. This
film, a reimagining of
The Wizard of Oz with
an all-African American
cast, is a key source of
inspiration for Williams.
Her gold bricks are a
riff on the iconic yellow
brick road.

The fate of the materials from the razed *Color(ed) Theory* houses is also at the core of Williams's recent work. Materials and footage of the demolition are included in numerous ways throughout the exhibition, one work in particular distills the significance of this project: *Reliquary II: LOT 49 IN THE SUBDIVISION OF BLOCK 1 IN WRIGHT, EMBREE AND AYRE'S, A SUBDIVISION OF BLOCK 33 IN SCHOOL TRUSTEES' SUBDIVISION OF SECTION 16, TOWNSHIP 36 NORTH, RANGE 14 EAST OF THE THIRD PRINCIPAL MERIDIAN, IN COOK COUNTY, ILLINOIS. C/K/A: NJ's Toybox* (2017). The title sets up a series of juxtapositions: the sculpture is simultaneously a toybox and a reliquary, which in some ways seems fitting. Normally, these objects are vessels for things held in high regard, albeit by different people for different reasons. The title introduces the possibility of the sculpture as both the object that instills notions of property from an early age, as well as the container for something sacred. Wedged between these two possibilities is the name of the land parcel as it appears on the Cook Country Property deed, adding another element of poignancy to the tension between the toybox and the reliquary. The title ultimately functions like a poem, drawing together themes of ownership and loss. Williams

² See Keller Easterling, *Subtraction* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2014).

³ For more information on this project, see Gordon Matta-Clark, *Circus: The Caribbean Orange* (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, 1978) or mcachicago.org/Collection/Items/Gordon-Matta-Clark-Circus-Or-The-Caribbean-Orange-1978

⁴ Susan Snodgrass, "Painting as Urban Archaeology," accessed June 6, 2017, insitereflectionsontheartofplace.wordpress.com/2015/08/01/painting-as-urban-archaeology

created this work with a child whose family members still reside in some of the last remaining households where the Crown Royal Bag house formerly stood. He had grown attached to the purple house and imagined that it was his toybox. Thus this collaboration responds to his disappointment while adding an optimistic chapter to his experience with the house as well as the lifecycle of the building materials.

Williams also uses maps in her work, though they function differently than tradition dictates. Beyond orienting the viewer to a space, they invite commentary on the urban environment. Her recent series of maps explores “Chiraq,” a neologism coined by young Chicagoans at the height of the Iraq War. The term was popularized in Chicago’s hip-hop community around 2012, when the city’s murder rate was one of the highest in the country, and has circulated nationally in popular culture, through music, television, and films; *Chiraq* has essentially become a shorthand description for gang-related gun violence and the resulting atmosphere of conflict.⁵ At the same time, many have condemned the term because it paints a negative and inaccurate impression of the city.

In response to this debate, Williams created a body of work that visualizes Chicago and Iraq through layered maps. Using a laser cutter, a tool routinely used by architects for model making, Williams created cut-paper maps of eight Chicago neighborhoods she selected based on how intensely the term has been contested, as a way to comment on the debate around the acceptability of the moniker. Each of these is layered with a simple map of Iraq, creating a delicate tangle of the basic features of each place. With these works, Williams visually draws attention to the ways the term reduces each place to a stereotype, challenging viewers to consider what binds these disparate places. Like much of Williams’s work, the maps activate a series of tensions, for instance, the lacey material feels at odds with the weight of the issue they visualize. At the same time, by focusing on specific Chicago neighborhoods but keeping the general shape of Iraq, Williams mimics and magnifies the awkwardness of the expression.

This work also engages with the way Chicago’s South Side neighborhoods, and Englewood in particular, have become the focus of media attention as neighborhoods plagued by high crime rates and low income—social ills that follow from the history outlined above. Focus on these issues, however, comes at a price: to many, the neighborhood becomes an abstract place defined by its grim statistics, obscuring the real texture of the place and the people who live there. The sensationalism and fearmongering preclude accounts of the positive and ordinary aspects of daily life. In contrast, Williams’s maps represent South and West Side neighborhoods in a neutral light, leaving the viewer to create their own connections and opinions about the geography on view.

Ultimately, despite the variety of forms Williams’s work takes, each project creates alternative narrative frameworks for questioning how value is related to space, property, and individuals. The worth of a brick or an empty lot has implications on urban policy but also on the role each individual plays in shaping the city. Williams’s work blurs the line between art and architecture, and in doing so, encourages viewers to bear witness to changing urban landscapes, while reminding us that we are each connected not only to the individual spaces we occupy but also to a broader structure that deserves our attention.



Garfield Park is Iraq?, 2017. Cut paper in wood frame; 30 x 22 in. Edition of 15, aside from 1 artist's proof. Courtesy of the artist and McCormick Gallery.

Crown Royal Bag from *Color(ed) Theory Suite*, 2014–15. Color photograph; 13 1/2 x 20 in. 1 of 7 images, boxed suite, edition of 10, aside from 2 artist's proofs. Courtesy of the artist and McCormick Gallery.

5 The term became more widely known beyond Chicago following Nicki Minaj and Lil Herb's 2014 song, a 2014 Vice web TV series, and Spike Lee's 2016 film—each of which was titled *Chiraq*.

Amanda Williams is a visual artist who trained as an architect. She was raised in Chicago's Auburn Gresham neighborhood and now lives in Bronzeville. Williams has lectured widely and published numerous articles about the relationships between art, race, and urbanism. She and artist Andres Hernandez received the Pulitzer Arts Foundation's PXSTL public art commission in 2017. Williams has served as an Adjunct Professor at the Illinois Institute of Technology and is currently a Visiting Assistant Professor at Washington University's Sam Fox School of Design and Visual Arts in St. Louis. She was recently named to the multidisciplinary Exhibition Design team for the Obama Presidential Center in Chicago.

AMANDA
WILLIAMS

JUL 18–
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Grace Deveney is Curatorial Assistant at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago.

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