

VANITAS: Kent Williams



Above: Kent Williams, *Vanitas*, oil on clay board, 36" x 36". Opposite: Kent Williams, *With Klimt Looking On*, oil on linen, 76" x 67".

"I've been drawing since I could remember," said Kent Williams, but he marks the beginning of his ability to draw the human figure from the sixth grade, when he saw a poster for Bruce Lee's film *Enter the Dragon* (1973). A theater across the street from his elementary school was displaying the poster on the marquee, and he could see it each day at the far end of the school yard—leaning

out as much as he could, just shy of tumbling into the street—trying to make out the details of the poster. "I must have drawn hundreds and hundreds of pictures of Bruce Lee. That's what started my love of the figure. Bruce Lee had a beautiful body, toned, worked and built to perfection.

“My interest in Asian culture grew, and I studied martial arts with a real-deal sensei from Okinawa from when I was about 12 right into college. In the '70s we only had three channels on the TV, and no VHS tapes to rent. I soon discovered films by Akira Kurosawa, like *Seven Samurai* and *Kagemusha: The Shadow Warrior*.

“I also started collecting art books, magazines on Bruce Lee, and Frank Frazetta’s work. It wasn’t [Frazetta’s] content so much, but the work was so good. Going to New York to study at Pratt Institute was the best thing I ever did. I’d never been to a major museum up to that time. At the

Met I was blown away. I couldn’t soak enough in. I love art books, but you have to get out and look at the original thing. There was a film series at Japan Society in New York. I joined and went every week or so to see another film. I became interested in film in general—Polish, Russian, European, there was so much to discover.

“My mother thinks my interest in art came from my great-grandmother, who would take care of me when I was a baby and my mother had to go out. She would keep me busy in the middle of the bed on a quilt she had made with lots of patterns and color. She would make mobiles out of coat hangers





Kent Williams, *Self-portrait as Rodin's Striding Man, with Appendages (Redux)* (2000, 2018), oil on linen, 84" x 144".

with pictures she had cut from magazines. I think maybe that's what got me interested in image making."

About his present work, Williams explained that "Most of my art deals with the human condition and is sometimes wrapped around myself and where I am emotionally. Naturally that touches on things a lot of people experience and feel. Being able to relate to someone else going through similar things can bring comfort to people—knowing you're not alone.

"I love to make drawings first, to establish at least the structural part of a composition. I'll start with a bank of drawings, and the ones I gravitate to usually have a figure. They're static and frozen in time, but there's also that underlying charge that seems to be bubbling up and wants to expand outward. I'll start painting and, if I'm successful, I'll maintain the drawing aspect while allowing myself to be bold with the brushwork. I want to maintain some of that linear suggestion and straightforwardness of the drawing. The

act of painting, though, wants to push away from the simplicity of the line. I work in many layers. Each pass is very broad, and the painting starts to refine itself in certain areas. If I begin to lose what I like, I sand it back down to a certain degree and knock enough paint off to allow the line to show through. It's a push and pull endeavour."

I mentioned the expatriate American painter John Singer Sargent's tendency to combine in a single painting highly realized images with areas of quick, nearly abstract brushstrokes. "Sargent had the ability to make it look so easy," Williams replied. "His paintings don't have the kind of probing I respond to. There's a passion in Degas. You can see his searching, and it doesn't take anything away from the painting—it's all laid out in front of you. Klimt began to do that as well to a degree. He, along with other artists of the time, started seeing Japanese prints and he began adding flat patterns, etc. in the background. That's when he really became Klimt as we know him."

For centuries, the passing of time has been a theme of vanitas paintings: still lifes that often include skulls to suggest life's brevity. Two skulls appear in Williams's *With Klimt Looking On* (2018), as well as in the more recent *Vanitas* (2025). In the older painting, a framed collotype print of a drawing by the Austrian artist hangs above a shelf on the right. "When I was composing the piece and developing what I wanted to do with it, I chose to weave it into the composition," Williams explained. "As a serious, passionate artist, I'm a big fan of contemporary art as well as the art of the past. I feel like I'm part of that tree of art—a bit of bark, or maybe a leaf. Putting the Klimt in the painting, maybe he's looking down on me and the other people who love his work—maybe he sees that and smiles.

"Life is fragmented," Williams said. "It's not as simple as I first imagined. It's a battle to stay organized. When I was finished with a show, I used to clean up my studio and start fresh. I used to have the time. Maybe, as you get older, time *does* go by faster."

Recently, Williams returned to a painting from a dark period of his life nearly two decades ago. Auguste Rodin is among Williams' top five favorite artists. "I can't imagine anyone having more love and respect for his work than I have. I feel I understand it so completely. In 2000, I chose his sculpture *l'Homme qui marche* (The Striding Man) to use as a vehicle for what I was going through—a deep dark place." He made several paintings on the theme, depicting himself as the striding man. "The sculpture is fragments, and I had to represent my fragmentation at the time," he explained.

l'Homme qui march (ca. 1907) is an assemblage of fragments from other sculptures. Rodin was trying to portray movement, omitting as unnecessary the arms and head. The slightly disjointed connection of torso and legs adds to the sensation of movement.

Self-portrait as Rodin's Striding Man, with Appendages (Redux) (2000, 2018) depicts Williams striding forward: "I'm going to walk out of this dark period." In a disjointed way, he holds the hands of his sons. "My boys are important to me," he said. "I never wanted them to feel unsafe. It was my burden, not theirs."

When Williams returned to the painting years later, he felt it was unfinished. "My ideas about painting had developed over time, and I wanted to take it further without losing the thrust of the piece," he said. "I thought that I would take away, obscure things and add to at the same time. The big white shapes were somewhat of an abstract element, my first pass at obscuring. I thought I would take the shapes further, but as time passed I felt they worked just as they were.

The French Impressionist Edgar Degas wrote, "A painting requires a little mystery, some vagueness, and some fantasy. When you always make your meaning perfectly plain you end up boring people."

With Klimt Looking On, Williams said, "allowed me to take something some people consider not contemporary, maybe even boring—still life—and bring juice to it. That makes it interesting to me, and to others as well I hope. I want people to respond to it. People who like the boldness of my figurative paintings can possibly enjoy a still life or a landscape by me as well.

"I want to expand on this. When you acknowledge something from one piece and use it in another piece, if the image allows for it, it becomes part of your language. I want it to come natural, not a gimmick. I want it to ring true. I want to be very much aware and to know when to employ it.

"Style isn't something you choose to do. It's not something you put on or assume. It's something that develops with thought and sweat equity.

"It may be something of which I may not be fully aware. I'll see a thread I'm responding to and it becomes part of my natural vocabulary—something I put work into. I have to paint and draw to move forward. I need to be prepared to meet what comes."

—John O'Hern